The Talk

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The turtles must endure a belated Talk about the birds and the bees. Mortification ensues! Forced to tackle many awkward and previously taboo topics, their most closely guarded secrets are revealed... whether they like it or not! Set in 2007-verse with bits of 2003 and Mirage thrown in for fun. Rated M for sex, drugs, and too-realistic descriptions of Ninja Turtle naughty bits.

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The Wait

THE TALK

AN: I don't own the turtles, nor do I make any money from plunging them into awkward and humiliating situations. Please enjoy.)

Chapter One: The Wait

Michelangelo let his gaze ping-pong restlessly between his two silent brothers. The awkward quiet had stretched for some time now, and by this point it was really getting to the youngest terrapin. He fidgeted through another six and a half minutes of it before finally giving in. Scooting closer to where Raphael was slouched across the opposite end of the couch, he stage-whispered, "What do you think they're talkin' about?"

"How the fuck should I know?" Raph bristled, looking away and slumping down lower into into the ratty, well-worn cushions.

"It's not our *business* , guys." Leo put a swift end to this speculation from where he sat comfortably in lotus position on the floor nearby.

Raphael was NOT in a good mood. Of course, neither were any of them by this point… But whereas his brothers were just mildly annoyed, Raph was steaming mad and putting all his concentration into not exploding at either one of his siblings. They weren't really at fault. He knew they weren't. But flying into a rage at the source would have meant going after Splinter, and that was something he would not let happen. Not ever, if he could help it.

But, damn it all! This waiting around is POINTLESS! Raphael fumed in stormy silence. He had been out the door and on his way, having made plans to hook up with Casey that night. Of course Raphael had still been near enough to hear the distant summons from Splinter's

gong, but he fully intended to ignore it and claim differently later. This might have worked, too -- except he hadn't expected anyone to catch up with him quickly enough to prove otherwise.

And there I was, just mosey-in' along... So stupid! Raph turned further away from the others to hide his grimace, silently berating himself. *Should'a run.*

Leo had scared the crap out of him, stepping out of the shadows and directly into his path without a whisper of warning. The sai were brandished before the sight of his big brother could fully register, each coming out with a soft and deadly 'snick'. Leonardo regarded the weapons coolly for a moment, then delivered Master Splinter's word-for-word request for everyone's presence in the dojo. There was not much Raph could do but put his weapons away and follow him.

They had barely started back when the gong rang again, distant but indisputable. Raphael flinched involuntarily at the incriminating sound, and Leonardo walking ahead of him fell briefly to a halt, listening. He did not look back at Raphael, but noted scathingly as he started walking again, *"Maybe we need to have your ears checked...?"*

The others had answered the summons promptly, and Raphael could feel the extra weight of Splinter's gaze as he moved into the room last to join them. Splinter told them that he needed words with Donatello first, and they were not to leave the common room until their private talk was concluded. The purple-masked turtle had been more startled than anyone at this, and his eyes went wide and imploring. But as he looked to his brothers (and particularly to Leo) for enlightenment, it was clear at a glance that not one of them had any better idea about what was going on.

Seeing Splinter give them a nod of dismissal, Raphael had been the only one to press for an explanation. But he did not get more than a few words into his protest before Splinter cut him off. There would be NO going to the surface tonight, he had assured them all with finality.

Well over an hour later, they were all still sitting around waiting.

Eventually Michelangelo felt he was going completely stir-crazy from the stifling silence, not to mention wracked with suspense. "Oh, screw this!" he announced, leaping up from where he sat.

"We're not to leave this room," Leo reminded him abruptly, bringing himself out of light meditation with a sharp blink and fixing a stern gaze on Michelangelo.

"I'm not, I'm not… chill, 'kay? Seriously." Mikey was already up, waving off Leo's warning and moving across the room. Snagging his Nintendo DS from the end of Donnie's desk where it had been charging, he bounced back to the couch waving it triumphantly. Thus having temporarily made a clever escape into the magical realm of Hyrule, Mikey passed the remaining time with relative ease.

Raphael continued to fume for some time, but as one hour stretched into two his scowl did eventually soften into blank introspection.

Leonardo threw himself back into his attempts to meditate, but the sounds coming from Mike's game combined with his own growing uncertainty and made it more difficult. Ultimately it was Leo who worried the most, perhaps more than his brothers combined.

Was Donnie in trouble? And if he's not… why hadn't Splinter wanted to speak privately to him , first? How could Splinter leave him in the dark, and then expect him to lead his brothers…? It wasn't fair.

Every time Leo thought he had achieved calm, his thoughts would spiral back into doubt. *Am I not trusted? Is this because I stayed too long in Central America?*

Or is there something else I've done wrong…?

The Favor

Chapter Two: The Favor

Donatello slowly eased the painted screen closed after the last of his brothers had filed out. Once they were gone, he and Master Splinter were alone in the dojo.

Master Splinter had taken a seat on one of the practice mats and was striking a match. Cupping one hand close to shelter the flame, he used it to light a jar-candle. Once the wick had caught, he set it down on the floor in front of him and watched the dancing flame for a moment. Momentarily he spied Don from the corner of his eye, standing frozen by the door. He did not speak but motioned to his second eldest son, bidding him to approach.

Don's heart was hammering and he felt strangely detached from the rest of his body as he started across the room. Even in moments like this one, there remained a part of Donatello's mind that was stubbornly logical and eternally calculating. Right now it was calmly taking note of his symptoms, cross-referencing them with what he could recall from his medical textbooks, and concluding that this light-headedness was definitely normal panic and not a full panic attack. He forced his breathing to slow as he closed the remaining distance, which helped, and came to stand in the lowered pit before his sensei and father.

"Kneel, my son," the wise old rat indicated the ground between them with a dip of his long, whiskered nose.

Donatello flashed him a timid smile before dropping down obediently and bowing his head low. Canting his head ever so slightly, he tried to peek up at Splinter's face with the hope that he might see something to disprove his pessimistic hunch. But while the elderly rat's glossy black gaze was completely benevolent, there was also

something deeply probing and impossibly wise there that quickly forced Donatello's eyes back down to the floor.

He stared at that spot on the ground between his splayed three-fingered hands. *Calm yourself.* His logic was speaking fiercely. *The odds favor any number of other reasons. You've been at this for a long time now. You've been careful , and not once-* But it was no use. His logic was conquered by a single, simple dread.

He knows.

Donatello had no explanation to accompany his certainty, no proof or evidence beyond the surety of his intuition. Perhaps it was some uncanny communication possessed by Splinter that did not need to reach beyond his wise, old eyes. He knew. And so the question became, *how much* did he know?

"I am sorry to have put on such a show in front of your brothers, Donatello. But I felt I must get their attention, and yours, my son. I have seen your struggle, and I have seen your uncomplaining generosity. I have been lenient with you of late, because of the pressure you have suffered willingly in Leonardo's absence. I have seen how hard you have worked for the sake of this family, and the sacrifices you have made. You have stepped away from your True Path… set aside your very dreams for us. And so I have been every bit as sad for you as I have been proud."

Donatello could say nothing yet, his cheeks darkening with a blush.

"I had hoped, perhaps," Splinter continued, quietly "— that once the unfair burden of this duty had been lifted…" He paused and seemed to choose his words carefully. "That once it was no longer required of you to be strong for the sake of your family, that you might remember that you can always confide in us… "

"As your sensei… for a year now, I have not been demanding. I have allowed you much privacy and solitude. As your *father,* I believe… I have been very patient."

"Yes," Donatello agreed softly, peeking up now to check Splinter's expression. This conversation wasn't unfolding at all like he had expected. Particularly this uncommon stalling…

Oh! Master Splinter... Realization swept over him suddenly, and came so unexpected that Donnie couldn't keep his wonder from spilling onto his face. *I… understand now. He's just as anxious and embarrassed as I am.* For some reason this thought helped immensely by putting his situation into a new perspective. He felt the sick knot of dread in his stomach unclench and start to dissipate.

"My son," Splinter said softly, clearing his throat. "It is time we spoke about the disturbances. I have felt them now and then, always late at night. It is hard to describe. Rather like the skin between worlds were tearing…"

"Temporal displacement," Donnie offered quietly, not meeting his gaze.

Splinter dipped his nose slightly, agreeing, "Mmn. A bit like… drawing a door to the Battle Nexus."

"Right. Almost. Except – you know, that one would cross great distances and this one—"

"—Spans time, yes." Splinter concluded, faintly wry at Donatello's quick underestimation of him. He was no wizard when it came to technology, but nor was he a stranger to the more mysterious workings of the world. "And is not *time* a rather dangerous toy? I had hoped your adventures by now would have impressed upon you a healthy respect for this, nature's most powerful of forces…"

"But Master, I – of course I respect time. It's never *me* playing with it. I mean, I haven't exactly tried to stop her either, but she *is* a… well." He trailed off with a small, awkward laugh. "As close to a trained professional as *I'm* likely to meet, anyway. Not quite like Lord Simultaneous, but ah. Considering the limited scope of our studies together so far, I don't really care to bother *him* for lessons…"

"Hmn," Splinter replied with a short grunt, letting his gaze drift off thoughtfully. "Again you speak in half-truths and continue to hide from me. But please, allow me to speak in whole-truth, and try to understand. More than the disturbances accompanying your late-night visitor, I have noticed the sudden and abrupt changes to your scent. Yes, I have smelled that apprentice girl on you. I can see her face clearly in my memory, but cannot seem to recall her name…"

"Renet," Donatello offered weakly.

"Yes, yes…" the rat bobbed his head serenely. "Renet. That was it." His gaze shot back to Donatello and he noted with equal parts delicate humor and kindness, "If you truly wished to hide from me… perhaps you would have been wiser to always have taken a *shower* before coming to breakfast that following morning, eh…?"

Donatello, quite mortified by this 'whole-truth', could only stare for a moment before mumbling, "Would someone. Just. Shoot me now, please."

"So much shame…" Splinter reprimanded him gently. "This, too, I have sensed in you. Any of your brothers may have gloated at such conquest, but you have hidden this from us all."

The purple-masked turtle nodded slowly at this. "I have always been rather different from my brothers."

"Yes," Splinter acknowledged. "You are unique among them for your relentless curiosity. You also possess an experimental nature that is tempered well by your intelligence, your practicality, and your caution. And through all of these, you have gained an understanding of women… in all their complexity! In this you surpass your brothers–" his sensei allowed a very slight smile to lengthen the whites of his front teeth, "—and for that matter, myself. But surely you must see that these are not bad qualities, my son. Why, then, do you think your heart is troubled?"

"It's difficult to say," the teen sighed quietly, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. He hesitated, but eventually gave his best guess. "Maybe… one reason is because I do not love her, sensei."

Splinter nodded slowly, troubled by this. "And yet you pursue her."

"Well…" the terrapin's olive green lips twisted in a guilty smirk as he clarified, "Actually, one could argue that it was Renet who pursued *me* . But… yes." At this his mirth vanished. "I've allowed it to continue. At first I think I was truly mistaking my attraction for her as – something more. And it was just so novel at the time, sensei – that she could want me at all! As a servant of time, she has seen so many strange and exotic races – and it was like sweet music to hear her tell me that I was no where near the strangest."

"You tell me you do not love her, my son," the old rat observed. "But then you go on to speak of this lady friend with what sounds like fondness to my ears."

"Oh, well, I certainly don't hate her! You DO remember how she looks, right? I mean, there's no denying it. She's completely stunning. And always running around in those thigh-high… things that she wears? And, okay. A *very* stupid hat. But-" Donatello rolled his shoulders in a what-can-you-do shrug, "hey, guess what? It comes off."

"Mrph," Splinter was trying not to chuckle at his son's sudden enthusiasm, with only partial success.

Donatello concluded his own quiet laugh with the heaving of a sigh. "You know, I could DEAL with a stupid hat. I think to myself, I could deal with a LOT of things. Just…" he cringed and threw up his hands, needing it off his chest so badly that the words nearly erupted from him, " *-not anytime she opens her mouth!"*

The rat's mouth hung open slightly at this, startled to hear such a thing from his 'gentlest' son.

Donatello's hands flew up to press them over his mouth, and he flew into muffled apology, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, that was so – horrible and disrespectful, and just – an awful thing to say, but – she can be *so annoying* , sensei. And yet," Don lowered his hands back to the floor and let his shoulders slump, "so very generous in, err – other ways, that it has been difficult for me to refuse her advances." He sighed, hitching his shoulders sheepishly. "Especially since… well, it's not like we're exactly overrun with opportunities."

"I know," Splinter finally allowed in a sigh, after a pause for reflection. "It is not what I hoped to hear from you, but – I do not think it necessarily means you are a wicked person, Donatello. Perhaps… it just means that you are male."

"But, Master Splinter – now it's getting serious! I need to do something about it soon. Lately, she's been talking like—" Don caught his lower lip in his teeth briefly, his expression imploring, "—like she thinks I'm. You know. Her *boyfriend.* "

"What… just for sleeping with her on a regular basis?" Splinter cocked his head towards his son in feigned shock, then lowered his head to look down his nose sternly. Pointedly wry, he concluded, "Imagine that."

"Okay, okay," Donatello mumbled, dropping his eyes with a bitter grin. "I see your point. But, really – you've got to help me. She even wants me to go to this – dance – thing! And she's having *clothes* made for me, for the thing, and *ohmigod, what if it's anything like the hat!?* And lately it's seriously ALL she can talk about. And. So. I just don't think she's going to TAKE it very well when I tell her that I'd really rather not go, because Heroes is on that night! And if I'm not there to watch it with him, Mikey will never forgive me!"

"My son, you do realize…" Splinter fixed him with a long, serious look before arching a brow and noting sagely, " *Syler* is coming back."

"I KNOW!" Donnie cried, throwing his hands wide.

It felt so good to finally speak openly that once Donatello got started, he found himself reluctant to stop. It was just such a heady rush of relief to finally talk about some of the secrets he'd kept bottled up for too long.

Once upon a time these talks had been such a regular pastime for the father and son… So many nights he had spent with a candle burning between them, Don venting his frustration over failed projects or difficult training sessions, or sometimes just asking question after question. All the times he had felt lovelorn, or alienated, or the nights his head was ready to burst from over-thinking his problems, Master Splinter had been there for him.

They continued to speak for almost three hours that night. He could not tell his sensei everything. Still, Splinter heard confessions that occasionally threatened his weak heart. But he never would do anything to compromise his promise: it would always be okay to confide in him. At times the elderly rat was left speechless with surprise, or honestly unable to advise his son for lack of any personal experience.

His original intention had been to call them all in one at a time for a private, long-overdue lesson on sexuality. But now Splinter couldn't help feeling that he was not equipped to teach such a lesson, after all.

"Donatello, I have come to a decision," he intoned when at last it seemed his son was finally winding down. He saw Donnie's posture change, going a bit straighter with both attention and trepidation. It seemed he expected to be lectured, or perhaps even punished. Splinter chuckled at the thought and assured him, lifting a frail but steady paw, "At ease, my son. I have realized that you are grown, and perhaps it is not my place to make demands at all regarding… these matters. Instead, I would like to trust your best judgment. After all, it has always been cautious and sound in the past."

Donatello looked startled and slightly uncomfortable to hear this. "Thank you, father…" He accepted the praise with a blush and a quick bow of his head.

"In exchange for the whole of my trust, I only ask two things of you: first, that you will always try to listen to what truths your heart speaks. I know it would guide you faithfully, so long as you remain willing to listen!"

"Of course, master. I will try to do better. As I've said to you… I understand that I have to end it. I know that now, more clearly than ever…"

"The second thing I would ask. It is simply a favor. A task I would assign you…"

Put at ease by his father's kind counsel and praise, Donatello smiled and replied earnestly, "Anything, sensei!"

He would come to regret those words.

The Night Prior

Chapter Three: The Night Prior

Splinter emerged and came to stand in the middle of the common room. Donatello followed him, looking less than confident. His gaze darted from one brother to the next with trepidation.

"I'm saving, I'm saving…!" Michelangelo piped up, the first to react as he punched furiously at his hand-held game.

Leonardo unfolded his legs slowly, as they had grown quite stiff in the interim. Reaching backwards, he snagged a pillow off the couch and threw it at Raphael, who had his head lolled back and was fast asleep. Raph woke with a startled snort and blinked blearily, looking around. "Bout freakin' time," he mumbled, and almost as an afterthought threw the pillow in his lap back at Leo. Then he readjusted his red mask and hauled himself to his feet with a groan.

Soon all the brothers were standing expectantly before Master Splinter. All, that is, except for Donatello, who was practically cowering at his sensei's side and looking like he wanted to melt into the floor.

"Donatello is in charge until further notice," Splinter intoned, surveying his boys' faces. "Please show him every respect you would show to me. That is all."

A stunned silence descended over the room.

It was Michelangelo who finally broke it. "Duuuude, sick burn!" he laughed, looking at Leonardo, whose mouth was hanging open.

Raphael grunted, possibly an attempt to cover his own laughter. "What, again?" He whirled on Leo and eyed him. "You goin' somewhere?"

Dazedly, Leonardo gave a slow shake of his head.

Donatello darted to take the old rat's robe as he turned to depart. "Master Splinter, wait! I – I'm not ready!"

"Of course you are ready," Splinter assured him, looking back and reaching to give Donatello's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Teach them what they need to know. Discuss all your concerns for them, as you spoke them to me."

"I'm not *prepared* !" Don insisted, his eyes now pleading. "Please, Master Splinter. If I am to do this… thing for you, I – I have to have to make notes, some kind of outline. I have to have my facts in order! If I'm to do it with anything like confidence, then – I MUST be prepared. That's just who I *am* , sensei."

The rat eyed his second eldest with a considering gaze, and finally grunted assent. "Very well. But I warn you not to keep them waiting too long, my son. Already they have grown impatient."

"Yes, Master Splinter." Donatello swallowed hard and turned back to his brothers. The expressions they wore couldn't have been more varied.

Mikey seemed both eager and highly amused, grinning ear to ear. "Orders, cap'n?" he snickered.

Raphael said nothing, but the droll look on his face conveyed his thoughts plainly without words: *What a waste of time* .

Leonardo's features were nearly blank, but there was something brooding and almost dangerous in the look he turned on Donatello now.

"You're all dismissed!" Don chirped. "I, uh – I have to go!" He practically bolted for his room, and hastily locked the door behind him.

"Jeezus effin' Christ," Raphael mumbled. "Here we go again."

"Sensei!" Leonardo appealed to Splinter. The rat was already moving back towards his own pocket of the lair, but paused to look over his shoulder now. "Then - what am I to do?"

"See that your brothers mind him well?" Splinter suggested. "And now... I must sleep." Ignoring the way this answer seemed to deflate his proud eldest, he turned and was gone.

Leonardo's initial attempts to mediate on the predicament were met with such swift failure that he didn't bother trying for very long. He went to the dojo but found it occupied by Raphael, still awake and half-heartedly practicing his turn-kicks.

He could have pointed out that Raph wasn't tucking his arm in close enough, but bit back the correction. Leaning against a pillar, he watched another few attempts before calling out, "Wanna spar?"

"Sure," Raph grunted, getting off one last kick before turning to Leo. "But just so ya know, I'll be leavin' soon."

"Casey? You still have enough time to bother going out?"

"Sure! Still two and a half hours til' last call," Raphael pointed out with a note of challenge in his voice. "Figured we could skip the runnin' around and go straight to the heavy drinking."

"Til Casey gets here, then," Leo agreed, moving into ready stance.

"Ha!" Raph grinned as they faced off. "I think I like this minds-his-own-damned-business version of Leo."

Swords and sai were drawn, and the two flew into practice. When Leo had Raph on the ground with a katana pressing against his neck for the second time within the space of ten minutes, he demanded hotly, "You going easy on me?"

Raphael merely widened his eyes, impressed. "I wish."

Leo extended a grudging hand to help his brother up, and they began again. This time it went back and forth between them for some time, with Raph pressing harder for victory, spurred by Leo's accusation. Leonardo's swords went flying as he was disarmed, and landed with a clatter.

But just as Raph was closing in for his well-earned victory, Michelangelo called down to them, "RAAAAPH! Casey's here!" Raphael winced instinctively, distracted. If Leo had been in charge, that would have summoned him. Instead it earned him a swift kick to the chest that sent him flying backwards, and the next thing he knew Leo's foot was poised gently over his trachea.

"Three of three," Leo announced with a smirk. "But if you wanna blame Mikey for that one, I understand."

Raphael grinned up at him, "Fair 'nuff." He extended his hand and was helped up a third time. Then Leonardo went to retrieve his katana. As Raph was headed for the door, he paused and regarded Leo over his shoulder for a moment. Then he took a rather bold chance, venturing somewhat skeptically, "I don't suppose… you might wanna come with?"

Leonardo said nothing. But Raphael blinked in amazement as he saw his brother was actually thinking about it.

"Come on… it'll be great!" He encouraged, slapping Leo on the shoulder and grinning wolfishly. "What, you afraid *Donnie's* gonna bust yer balls?"

"That," Leonardo noted wryly, "is a very good point. Let's go."

Michelangelo was bored.

At first he actually tried to sleep, but it would not come. Staring up at the ceiling, he couldn't deny the lump of hurt that he'd been trying to shrug off for the past hour. Raphael had taken Leonardo out drinking and hadn't even thought to invite him! Raph could be so over-protective sometimes, but this really took the cake. Life in general might be so much easier on him if he could just stop looking up to Raph so much...

Hauling himself out of bed with a sigh, he made an attempt at channel surfing but nothing on TV remotely held his interest. He wandered into the kitchen and made himself a midnight snack. Somewhere in the process of making himself something, his ingredients started to double and before he knew it he was making not just some munchies for himself but a peace offering to Don.

"Hey Don? Can I come in?" he called through the closed metal door. "Are you working?"

"I – um. Yeah. I mean no, I called off. But yes I'm still working on something."

"Then – can I come in anyway? Maybe I can help! Also, I made you some chips and guacamole. Two bowls, made fresh: mild for you, extra spicy for me."

The door opened a crack and a nervous-looking Don peeked out. "Yeah... okay. I should probably eat something. But I don't think this is anything you can help me with."

Michelangelo's face closed. "Right. Cause I'm just not on your level of supreme genius, yeah?" He snagged one of the bowls of green dip off the tray and shoved the remainder towards Don roughly.

"No, Mikey! That's not it at all!" He took the tray, coming further out of his room.

"Y'know Don, why is it that every time YOU take charge, *I'm* the one who winds up bored and fucking lonely?"

Donatello's face pinched with regret. "Oh Mikey, I'm sorry." He looked down at the carefully arranged tray of chips. A little pile of napkins… There was even a wedge of lime stuck to the side of either bowl. "Well, I'm nearly done. And, please don't ask me to explain any of it until tomorrow's lesson, but…"

Mike was already grinning ear to ear, having sensed he'd won. He pushed past Donatello and started to clear a space on the desk so they would have room to set the chips and guac down. Partway through this task his eyes went wide at one of the completed visual aids. "Hey, she's *naked!* "

"Yes, Mikey. Don't touch." Donatello looked his little brother over with a sigh. "Now, can I *trust* you with a glue gun?"

"Come on Leo," Raphael grunted. "Stay with me, now. It's jussa' lil' further. I need you to walk f'me. I am *way* too fucked up to carry your ass alla'way back to the lair."

"Nnf," Leonardo grunted noncommittally.

"I mean it, Leo. Hey. Tell me summore' bout Costa Rica…"

"Costa Rica…"

"Yeah. Tell me 'bout it."

"Trees'd make… like, a ceiling. So thick there'd be no sun. And below… all leafy green darkness. Can blend… Y'so invisible there…"

"Yeah? Maybe we'll go some day. And you can run stealth practices."

"And the villages. They called me Ghost. And the girls, sometimes… The native ones. Black, black skin, and they hardly wore anything. Maybe… hand fulla' nuts and bones on strings…"

"Wha-aaat?" Raphael laughed, giving his brother a little heft to readjust him to a more comfortable spot against his shoulder.

"So they'd jingle," he nodded, "and clatter. Wherever they walk."

"Huh," muttered Raph, lapsing into silence as he tried to picture it.

They walked on for a time, but then Raphael felt that his brother was starting to drag and slump. "Leo? Ya with me bro?" Again he had to rouse him.

"Yzz," Leo mumbled, head lolling.

Raph reached out and forced Leonardo's gaze, checking his condition. Leo blushed after a moment and they both looked away. Raphael suddenly demanded, propelling them both forward, "Gotta stay awake, damnit. Tell me summore' bout Costa Rica!"

"Wull," Leo cocked his head to peek up at his brother almost slyly now. "In the jungle, there's bugs. Lotta bugs."

Raphael made a face.

"Big'zz yer head," he added pleasantly, glad to have gotten a visible reaction.

"Can't imagine what you saw in that place," Raph grumbled. "Ain't got nothin' on good ole' New York."

"Y'really wanna know…?"

There was a sad, distant note in Leo's voice that caused Raphael to pause and glance down at his brother. "Yeah, I do."

Leonardo dropped his eyes. "Was… so free."

In the privacy of the sewer tunnels just outside the lair, Leonardo knelt and was repeatedly, violently ill for fifteen minutes that felt like

fifteen hours. Raphael stayed with him, holding back the tails of his bandana and mumbling reassurances.

"Don't feel bad, Leo. Yer a champ. Shoulda seen how bad it was for me, my first time… Taco Bell beforehand probably wasn't such a good idea, huh?"

"Grk—"

"Yeah... I'm sorry Leo. You *know* I'm sorry, don't you?"

"S'not… you," Leonardo gasped. "Din' push me. I – I pushed myself."

It was true. If anything, Raphael had been hinting near the end that he ought to slow down. Still, now he was looking at his brother with unabashed guilt. "Yer gonna hate me in the morning," he noted glumly.

"No…" Leo grimaced and spat over the edge. Having given up the contents of his churning stomach, his head felt a little clearer. He scrubbed his lips with the back of his hand and assured his brother in a soft, shaky voice, "Not gonna hate you. Tomorrow… ever." He coughed and spat again into the dark, murky water below. "If anything. I wish… it could be like this between us. More often."

"Yeah," Raphael looked at him for a moment before averting his gaze. Somewhat gruffly, to cover his emotion, he agreed, "Yeah, bro. Me too."

Qualifications

Chapter Four: Qualifications

"He IS coming, right?" Donatello wondered, eyeing his two brothers.

"I... think so," Raphael hedged, looking strangely guilty.

"Well, as soon as we're all here we can begin."

Michelangelo rolled his eyes and bounced up off the couch. " *I'll* get him."

"Please do," Donatello sighed. "He's not allowed to miss this."

"Maybe you could cut the guy a break, just this once…"

Don was hooking his laptop up to a projector, but paused to shoot Raphael a strange look. "Splinter's orders. And since when do YOU stand up for Leo? What's the matter with him, anyway? Is he sick? It's really not like him to be late for a lesson."

Raphael sat with his shoulders hunched and his arms draped over his knees. "How should I know?" he scowled. It kind of surprised him that Don hadn't figured out the situation yet. Then again, Mikey was a lot of things, but a snitch wasn't one of them. Raph had to respect that.

He continued to work, but by the way he was abusing his lower lip it was clear that Don was fretting now. "If this is some stupid machismo thing about leadership," he continued abruptly without preamble, "I hope he knows that he's getting it back the MOMENT I'm through with this."

"Nah, screw that. He's gonna duel ya for it," Raphael snerked, lowering his chin and looking up at Donnie slyly, "Says he'll kick yer scrawny ass." This was especially amusing for Raph due to the fact

that he WAS directly quoting Leo – though he'd said it somewhat jokingly, and whether he actually *remembered* saying it was still anyone's guess…

Don naturally didn't buy a word of this, though he did complain, "I didn't even WANT it. Splinter just said it all wrong, if you ask me."

"Aww, quit yer whining, will ya?" Raphael rolled his eyes. "Let's go with your first guess. Leo's sick. End'a story. Okay?"

"Very sick," came a grumbling voice as Leonardo padded in, a blanket still wrapped around him. He set down heavily next to Raph with a notable lack of his usual grace. "But present."

"Great! Hmm. You do look horrible, by the way."

"Yeah, thanks."

Donatello looked around, doing a quick head count. "And so let's – uh. Wait. Did we lose Mikey, somehow?"

"I'M MAKING TEA FOR LEEEOOOO!" Michelangelo yelled merrily from the kitchen, several decibels louder than necessary. "AND BAGELS FOR MEEEE!" Leo endured this racket silently, but his suffering showed in the way his eyes squinted throughout it. Little known fact, but Mikey was a 'morning person'. Normally Leo was too, but today was different. So far, today was agony.

Donatello fiddled around with his laptop and his notes until Michelangelo made a cheerful appearance, perching on the couch's arm rest, legs dangling. With a mouth full of blueberry bagel, he gestured towards Don's work area and wondered, "Wan' meh' geh eh' fing fuh' ya' righ' aw?"

Don nodded, "Yeah, and bring the markers with the blue caps, if you would."

"Hole' diff," Mikey thrust his half-eaten, butter-drenched bagel at Leonardo, who took it and belatedly shuddered like he'd been handed a dead mouse on a plate. Raphael's lips ticked briefly with sympathy and he took the plate from Leo while Mike scampered off to grab the markers and wheel in the large, white wipe-board. Bringing it out into the common room proper, he tossed the markers to Don before reclaiming both his breakfast and his seat.

"So, let's do this!" Mike beamed at Donatello encouragingly.

Donatello flashed him a shy grin before grabbing the black marker and turning to scribble along the top of the board. "Alright class… welcome to Sex Ed." Over his shoulder they could now read the following words: *SEXUAL EDUCATION.*

"Oh, *gimme a break!* Is that what this is about?" Raphael demanded. "Yeah, how's this? I'll just try REALLY hard not to knock up any girls on my way back to bed." He started to get up, but simultaneously found one end of Don's bo staff pressing his chest and Leonardo gripping his shell from behind.

"If I gotta suffer through this," Leonardo grumbled, "there's no way you're escaping." Raph gave no more protest than a roll of his eyes, so Leo appealed to Don. "But Don, can we make it quick?"

"That entirely depends on you guys, and your cooperation."

"You gotta be kidding me," Raph was still muttering as he flumped back down reluctantly. "What makes you the expert on this stuff, anyway?"

"Um, just, my, uh," Donatello flashed them all one of his more typical awkward grins, "—experience. Actually."

Leonardo was still huddled in his blanket cradling the steaming cup of tea, but he peered up at Don now and wondered in a flat voice, "What kind of experience?"

Donatello sighed, glancing around at them. "Well. Okay… Let's see." His gaze skimmed the surface of the folding table he'd hauled out for the lesson. Plucking up a device with a dangling USB cord, he held it up and announced, "This, for starters! Sure, she doesn't look like much. But what you are looking at is a hundred-and-twenty gig, password-protected external drive. And she's only about fifty-five gigs full at the moment, but growing almost nightly."

"Dude, so – what, some internet porn?" Michelangelo wasn't impressed. "Big deal! I got a pretty hardcore magazine collection, myself."

"Mikey, if you had fifty-five gigs worth of magazines in your room," Don pointed out, "I'm pretty sure there'd be no room for you to sleep there."

"What's with the skull and crossbones sticker?" Raph wanted to know.

"Cuz she's full of treasure? Like, serious booty? Gah, I don't know. I was sleep deprived; it seemed funny at the time. Anyway, this is my baby." Don pressed the external hard drive to his plastron protectively. "And if anything ever happened to her, you *would* see me break down and cry." He turned his grin on Raphael and stabbed a finger at his brother knowingly. "And you, don't get any ideas. I mean it. You *will* find out what it takes for me to resort to unnecessary and excessive violence."

Raphael widened his eyes innocently and put up both hands. "Hey, I am not gonna be the one to stand between a perv and his porno. Still don't 'zactly see how this qualifies you to play the part'a Dr. Ruth, here."

"Alright, fair enough. I was also the first one to learn *how* to have a solo experience, squeaking in *just* ahead of Leo I might add. The nosy bastard."

Leo snorted into his teacup and nodded grudgingly, "Yeah. I, uh – kind of demanded to know what he was doing." Then he covered his eyes with one hand and laughed softly at the memory.

"Yeah, you see this trend? I *always* get stuck teaching the awkward lessons." He shook his head wryly, then turned to Raphael and Mikey to direct his next question at them. "Any of you want to wager a guess as to how I'm so oddly certain about the order of this particular timeline for our, ehh, coming of age? No pun intended."

Dead silence. Oh, they all had an idea. But no one wanted to say it.

"Come on… anyone? What was the hands down most embarrassing part of puberty for us? Guys, we ALL dealt with it. We all STILL deal with it."

Raphael looked between his brothers before rolling his eyes and deciding to step up. Muttering the words with deadpanned annoyance, "That… noise."

"Thank you, Raph! That noise we make. Breeders commonly refer to this as churring. Churring is the reason we've all gotten into the habit of taking ourselves AWAY from the lair to relieve ourselves of our – pent up – uh, urges."

"Though some of us are a little LESS in the habit than others," Raphael growled through his teeth, reaching behind Leo to smack the back of Michelangelo's head.

"OW! Look, dude," he went on to insist shamelessly, "sometimes it's *urgent* ."

Leonardo found himself siding with Raphael, but took a gentler approach. "We're all getting pretty sick of it, Mikey."

"Oh, well, if Don would just go ahead and sound-proof MY room too…"

"We've been OVER this, Mikey," Donatello sighed. "Save up four-thousand dollars and I will. Gladly."

Leo gaped at Don. "You spent *four-thousand dollars* on that?"

"He totally did." Michelangelo was grinning now, glad that the heat was off him.

"Hey! All paid for with my own hard-earned money, thank you very much, and a sound investment if ever I saw one! In fact, I *still* sing hosannas to my own god-damned brilliance every night that you guys are creeping off to some dark, smelly sewer pipe and I can just kick back on my own comfy mattress and go to town."

Raphael looked around with shifty eyes for a moment before speaking up, "Hey, uh – Don? We ain't really talked about it, but. Just so you know. I been uh, puttin' away for it myself. Got like – fifteen hundred, so far?"

"ARGH! I'm soooo jealous!" Mikey wailed.

"Well, maybe if you didn't spend all your money on comic books or – whatever you spend it on," Raphael warned pointedly.

"Alright, *enough,"* Leonardo asserted suddenly. "Now, I don't even want to KNOW where you're getting that kind of money, Raph –"

"Aww, Christ," Raphael groaned. "I think Fearless just woke up."

"And you" Leo stabbed a finger at Don, "get it *back on track* , or I'm going back to bed."

"All right, all right! Yeesh." Don scratched his chin thoughtfully and wondered, "Where was I?"

"Churring," Mike supplied helpfully.

"Right!" Don grabbed his notes and peered over them briefly before setting them down again. "Okay, that actually wasn't even supposed

to come up until later, but since I've brought it up I'll just say one last thing about it. Churring is perfectly natural – for turtles. And *only for turtles.* So, if you're ever in a situation where you're actually going to, you know, be with someone? Please warn them first. Prepare her, because if you don't… It. Will. Freak. Her. Out." He stressed this with gesture, turning his gaze on each brother in turn. "If she's a primate-evolved partner, and that means human or human-like, then she will NOT be expecting it. Without warning her you are almost guaranteed to kill the mood, not to mention greatly decrease your chances of ever getting with her again.

"Likewise, be prepared for the fact that even if you DO warn her, she may still wind up laughing her head off when she actually hears it. Do not be offended. It's not their fault. It's just odd for them, and after a few times she'll relax and get over it, and you guys can – you know, do whatever and have a great time.

"So… uh, that's all I got on churring. And... um. What?" Donatello had realized by now that all his brothers were staring at him.

Leonardo in particular was leveling a rather calculating gaze at Don, and he was the first to speak up. "That's… just very astute of you, Don. Hypothesized all that, did you?"

Even Michelangelo was giving him an odd look. "Yeah, Donnie. What the hell?"

"Oh. Right. Uh…" He scratched bashfully at the back of his neck, his gaze darting from one suspicious gaze to the next before looking down at his feet. "I guess that sort of brings us to my third qualification. I might've… also, sort of… sleptwithsomegirls. OKAY! Heh, any further questions?"

There was a beat of stunned silence. Then three hands went up in the air.

Don's voice crept up an octave. "Any questions that DON'T relate to the sundry details of my personal and very private romantic

escapades?"

The three hands went back down.

"Great! Fantastic. Well then, let's move on to Lesson One, shall we…?"

Basic Anatomy

Chapter Five: Basic Anatomy

Donatello wiped the board clean of the words 'SEXUAL EDUCATION', then replaced it with: 'Lesson One: BASIC ANATOMY'. His marker made a squeaking sound against the slippery surface, causing Leo to entertain brief fantasies about wrestling it away from him and snapping it in two.

"Mikey?" Don asked. "Would you hang up displays A and B? There should be some blue tacky stuff you can use on the desk, there."

"You bet!" He leapt up to help, coming around the desk and rifling through the various displays. One seemed to catch his interest, though, distracting him from the task at hand. "What about display D?"

"Huh? We don't need that one yet."

"But I *like* display D," he argued, grinning and looking it over with appreciation.

"Mikey…"

"Ok, ok. I'm going! Just right next to each other…?"

"Leave a bit of space in between each so I can make notations." He looked up from reviewing his notes, eyeing the placement, and nodded. "Yeah, that's perfect."

Once the displays were hung, Donatello noticed Mikey snagging his sketchbook off the desk on the way back to his seat. "What do you need that for?" he wondered with a note of suspicion in his voice.

"Duh, taking notes!" Michelangelo beamed, a picture of innocence. "This is, like – an official lesson, right?"

Leonardo gave his youngest brother a meaningful glance when he sat back down, unconvinced. He knew full well what uses Mikey had for his sketchbook during *Splinter's* lessons, and Donatello should too. But the purple-masked turtle seemed fit to let this slide, so Leo directed his attention back to the front of the room rather than get involved.

Donatello aimed the projector up at the wipe-board and took a seat behind it. "All right guys, here we have the internal anatomy of a red eared slider – somewhat well documented. And to the right of that, the reproductive anatomy of a human male – VERY well documented."

"Ugh," Raph commented, making a face. "Who'd'a thought humans would be even uglier on the inside?"

Leonardo did not chime in, but found himself agreeing with this line of thought. There was just something neat and tucked away about the red eared slider's various parts, whereas the human's inner anatomy seemed a mess of obscene tubes and bulges and pouches.

"There were plenty of pre-existing charts that went into even more detail than this one, but for our purposes this one will do fine. The truth is, of course, that *neither* of these charts applies to us accurately. Like this we don't have…" Don started using the stylus on his tablet laptop to scratch out one of the tubes on the human male. "And we don't have these, either." He blacked out one of the larger pouches. Then, with a single key-press, Donatello's scribbles on the chart vanished and it was clean again. Leo's brow ridges went up slightly at this, impressed. This was definitely more high-tech than any lesson Splinter had taught them. "First," Don continued, "let's go over which of these reproductive parts DO apply…"

Not long into lesson one, Leonardo found himself wondering if maybe the little stylus and tablet gadgetry wasn't such a good idea after all. Oh sure, it could illustrate notation and changes well… But Don seemed to be having such a good time with the tools of his lecture that he didn't notice he'd lost over half of his audience. Leo

was pretty sure he was the only one still following what Don was actually saying. Mike and Raph were rather engrossed in passing the sketchbook back and forth. They even had the nerve to make their passes behind Leo's shell, using it for cover.

Leonardo endured this a few more times before rocking backwards suddenly, hard enough to pinch Raphael's fingers between his shell and the notebook. Raph grunted and swore under his breath, tugging his hand free and shaking off the injury. His muttering brought Donatello's attention back to the three of them.

"Raph, is there a problem?"

"No."

The notes disappeared from the screen, leaving the two blank charts. "What's this?" He drew a black line over one of the tubes.

"That's the, uh... Fucked if I know how ya pronounce it."

"Give me your best shot."

Raphael proved he'd at least been paying SOME attention by answering, "The, um. Urr… etha… rar."

"Urethra. Close enough. Mikey! Where's it located, for us?"

"Uh. Like… in our tail?"

"Very good." Satisfied, Don launched back into his lecture. Mikey was looking particularly smug, because of course he had just made a lucky guess.

The sketchbook was still pinned between Leo's shell and the couch cushion, and he reached back to collect it now. Peering over Mikey's 'notes', he had to struggle to keep a straight face.

It read:

$5 – APRIL

$10 – some internet chat whore. probely ugly/crazy

DUDE HE'S ALWAYS LOVED HER!

hello… casey? it would be fucked

up of him he has standards

HARD ON *(greater than sign)* **STANDARDS** *(This was punctuated with an anime-style smiley face.)*

wtf mikey. ok. she has standards

casey *(equals)* **good lookin human dude**

don *(equals)* **freaky mutant turtle**

u do the math

DON *(equals)* **HAS GAME, APPARENTLY**

RAPHAEL *(equals)* **GONNA OWE ME $10!**

Leonardo had intended just to keep hold of the sketchbook. But as he tried to reorient himself with what Donatello was saying he found himself quite lost. Furthermore, the effort of trying was making his headache return full force. Finally he dropped his eyes back to the sketchbook and re-read what they'd written. Reaching back behind his shell, he felt for the pen and made a small note at the bottom, glancing up at Don as he wrote to make sure his attention was on the charts.

In his precise and gently slanted script, it now read:

$40 - Jhanna.

He passed the sketchbook to Mikey, who blinked at him in surprise. When he saw Leo's addition, he choked back a giggle and scribbled a quick reply. The notebook was slipped to Raph from behind his shell, who accepted it – but not without casting Leo a wary glance.

When it came back around to him again, he smirked at what his brothers had written in the sketchbook.

LEO'S PLAYING LOL!

forgot about that blue chick thats a good one. fuck. im out.

He smiled, pleased, and added to the sketchbook boastfully:

Hair still in his room, guys. Game, set, match.

Leo peeked back towards Don, who was saying, "I couldn't find a single chart detailing the exact route of the ductus deferens on a red eared slider, but my theory is that it just takes the shortest route, along here and down through here. Until I get hold of some proper x-ray equipment…"

Meanwhile, Michelangelo was taking too long with his reply.

Curious, Leonardo shot an early glance at the sketchbook, leaning in to look over his youngest brother's shoulder. Mikey's text was large but not messy to behold, and really quite beautiful in its own way. Though entirely composed of capital letters, they were almost like the lettering in the comic books he so adored.

…Or in the manga Leonardo himself had taken up reading, though it was one of his deepest, darkest secrets. Raphael would never let Leo live it down that Mikey had actually found a type of comic that Leo could appreciate, not when they'd both been harassing Mikey about his comic book addiction for years. And especially not when Raph saw that his tastes ran towards Shoujo, though the darker and more mature the better. There was also plenty of straight-up hentai, but somehow Leo thought that he would be more forgiving of

'Bondage Fairies' than some of his more fluffy stuff. Like right now, he was addicted to this one angsty romantic series called Fruits Basket. There were these characters in it, these brothers named Yuki and Kyo that he could identify with so well, due to his own relationship with Raph…

Leo snapped out of the daydream and looked back up to reorient himself with the lesson. *Oh, man. He's got a whole new chart up now?* This one was kind of disturbing, too. It was a finished chart of Donnie's best estimation of their actual anatomy. He skimmed it over, but it really was far less interesting than what Mikey was writing.

Leo could now make out the following:

NAH, HOLD UP!

DONNIE *(equals)* **NOT THAT MUCH GAME!**

(This line was outlined with a zig-zag shaped speech bubble, detailed in three lines of varying thickness.)

WAY OUT OF HIS LEAGUE, DUDES! JHANNA WAS LIKE A PRINCESS OR SOME SHIT. *(Here a quick little sketch of a crown decorated the margin, with three little lines bursting out to indicate that it was sparkling.)* **SINCE THAT FIGHT WAS LIKE AN ELECTION OR WHATEVER, SHE'S GOT TO BE ALL BUSY RUNNING THE WORLD OF BLUE CHICKS WHO CAN TOTALLY KICK YOUR BUTT. TOO BUSY FOR BOOTY CALLS ANYWAY.**

SO I STILL SAY IT'S APRIL. BESIDES THOSE TWO TOTALLY HAVE

Raphael was growing impatient just watching him. "You writing a goddamned novel or what?" he hissed. Mikey dismissed this with a wave, not looking up from what he was writing.

Raphael and Leonardo both realized it the moment Donatello's attention had honed in on them. It wasn't really hard for them to

notice, seeing as Don had stopped mid-sentence and turned to look at them. They both affected perfect impressions of attention, and Don's annoyed gaze only knifed through them for a moment before moving on.

But Mikey… Damn the boy, he was still scribbling furiously in his sketchbook. He had launched into a full-fledged essay entitled ' **REASONS JHANNA + DONNIE EQUALS TOTALLY NO WAI!'** ; the way he was now hunched over the book and making such regular strokes, Leo was starting to suspect that the sketchbook might have come back complete with fully inked illustrations.

Even Don could not stay angry at the sight, the brief flame of his temper flickering out and his expression softening at the kid's animated face, tip of his tongue sticking out of his mouth in concentration. After all, Mikey did this sort of thing all the time.

"Mikey! What's a cloaca?"

"Huh?" Michelangelo looked up with a blink of surprise.

"A cloaca! What is it? Point to it."

"Uh." He looked at his brothers for help. Leonardo was giving him a look that said, *I can't believe you don't know this.* Mike bite his lip and shook his head helplessly. Then he was looking down at himself, trying to come up with another lucky guess.

"Not on yourself," Donnie laughed. "Point to it on the *chart,* you imbecile!"

"Oh, right!" Mike grinned. "It's uh, right down by the… I mean wait. It's the pouch with the…" He saw Don's eyes roll. "I mean the tube! The tube with the…" He could tell he was crashing and burning. "Sorry dudes, I got nothin'," he winced, giving up.

"It's your *tail slit,* Mikey!" Raph informed him explosively. "Geezus!"

"Okay, seriously Mikey," Donatello mumbled with fondness, sticking out his palm. "Hand over the sketchbook."

Mike hunched his shoulders sheepishly. Then he stood up and announced, "Well, since I'm caught anyway…" He scribbled something quickly at the bottom, then held up the page so both Leo and Raph could see what he'd been working on.

His final reason listed took up the entire bottom half of the page. It was simply this:

PRINCESS JHANNA *(equals)*

(The start of what was probably meant to be a simple sketch, but his tweaking and subsequent little additions were turning it into a very lovely comic-styled picture of the low-born warrior who'd fought for her right to become princess right before their eyes. With remarkably few lines he was able to capture a likeness of her tossing those long coiled dreadlocks - the ones she cut off for Donnie - over one shoulder and looking impatiently toward the 'camera' …

And then, what Mike had scribbled down at the very end…)

(equals) **TOTAL WICKED HOTNESS!**

"If it's any good, I'll give it back later. But I need you to pay attention. We're almost done with this part, okay?"

Way too nice, Leo privately criticized. *He deserves the back of his head smacked for showing off like that.* But it wasn't like he could bring it up when he and Raph had played such a part in it. That, and it did work.

"Sure, Don," Mike sighed. Leaping up, he turned his sketchbook to Don, tossing it face down onto the folding table. In truth, this extra courtesy was partly an attempt to keep the blame from spilling onto his siblings. Mikey especially didn't want to see Leo get in trouble, as he was all for encouraging this rare mischievous streak his big

brother had been showing lately. He figured he could snag the notebook back at some point before Don remembered it.

But he didn't take account of his brother's relentless curiosity. Donatello trailed after him and picked the notebook up, immediately reading it over. Glancing over and noticing this, Mikey winced and mouthed "Sorry guys!" to Raph and Leo on his way back to the couch.

"It's cool," Raphael smirked. He wasn't scared of Donnie.

Leonardo felt more responsible, though, his cheeks flushing with shame. Especially in the way Donnie's face changed, going completely unreadable with a sudden play of complex emotions. Then his gaze skittered up to meet his eldest brother's gaze, and he mumbled, "Et tu, Leo?" The elder brother dropped his eyes.

Mikey shifted uncomfortably, worried that Donnie might also be upset with some of the more critical points of his impromptu essay. "Hey, man. I uh, I didn't mean to knock your game or say any of that stuff about bein' such a huge nerd. Really, I was just playin'!"

This brought Don's strange gaze back to his youngest brother, and it shifted again – this time into a twinkling grin. "Oh, don't feel so sorry for me, Mikey," he snickered. " *You're* the one who owes Leo forty bucks."

Michelangelo's mouth dropped open hugely. "Are you shitting me? You're not, are you? Holy CRAP, dude! You got with Princess JHANNA! That is sooo cool!"

Donnie gave a shy shrug, his cheeks dark now with a blush. When his gaze went back to the sketchbook and lingered on Mikey's picture, that strange look came onto his face again. Armed with the proper context, they could all see it plainly now: he was *remembering* her.

"Like, all the way?!" Mike was demanding, on his feet now and shaking Don by the shoulder incessantly.

"Mikey…" Don laughed, trying unsuccessfully to detach himself. "If you mean full intercourse, then no, okay? I was only fifteen." His face sobered, brow ridges furrowing. "But I still consider her my 'first'. Now drop it, *capiche* ? Girls don't really appreciate it when you blab to everybody about the stuff you got to do with them. And while it's unlikely that I'll ever see her again… NOT for lack of trying, damn it, but as it turns out becoming the ruler of a sovereign nation makes a person suddenly very hard to get in touch with." He hugged the sketch closer to his plastron and looked at his brother hopefully. "Can I please keep this?"

Mikey absolutely beamed at this. "Well, if you want it then I totally need to finish it. But, yeah Don - of course!"

"Thank you." He smiled sweetly, then cleared his throat and looked at the others. "Yeah. Uh, anyway… this would be a great time to move on to Lesson Two."

"So, by saying 'first'," Raphael pointed out dryly, "you're sort of implying there's been MORE. You sure I didn't win any money?"

"Internet whores who are ugly slash crazy?" Don paused from where he was plucking the charts off the wipe-board to look at his brother disdainfully. "Um, that'd be a no."

"Damn," Raph snapped his fingers and flashed a wolfish grin.

Questioning Relevance

AN: Many hugs and kisses to GreenWillow for coming on board as beta reader for The Talk! Also, thanks again to everyone who has left reviews – you guys make my day! To show my deep appreciation, I have super-sized this chapter for you, free of charge! Thank you, drive through… and please enjoy! XD

XOXO

Whitney

Chapter 6: Questioning Relevance

Donatello picked at a rogue bit of sticky-tack with one fingernail and then stepped back to survey the once again blank white-board. Gathering up his courage with a slow, in-drawn breath, he picked up the green marker and wrote out the next lesson's topic in big, block letters across the top of the board: **BASICS OF SEXUALITY** . Then, replacing the marker's cap and releasing his breath in a quiet sigh, he closed his eyes and waited.

He did not have to wait very long.

"Oh, come *on* ," Raphael groaned loudly, lifting his hands in a caustic appeal to the domed ceiling overhead. "What kind of bullshit lesson IS this, Donnie? You really expect us to sit through this crap like we're ten years old or somethin'?"

Leonardo said nothing, studying the slow swirl of black flakes and specks floating in the red-brown puddle at the bottom of his teacup. He found it somewhat unsettling that his private thoughts echoed the bitter protests being voiced now by his brother Raphael. He didn't care for all the swearing and posturing, but couldn't help feeling that

Raph maybe was on to something. So far Don's lecture had pretty much been a waste of everyone's time.

Well sure, there had been that one unbelievable and world-upending revelation – his least confident, least athletic, reclusive, total geek of a little brother was actually getting *laid* . Leo wasn't sure what to think about that. And ASIDE from that one shocking disclosure, they'd learned nothing else that Leo would consider useful. None of it was applicable to their ninjitsu training. None of it was helpful or even relevant to their daily lives.

Well, he had to stop and amend, *not to my life, anyway. And not to the parts of life our team OUGHT to be focusing on.*

Now that he understood where Don was going with this 'lesson', Leonardo found himself trying to staunch his growing upset at their sensei for allowing this. He didn't understand why Splinter thought it necessary to put them through it, or -- if this was Don's idea -- why he'd given consent. He couldn't imagine what they possibly stood to gain… certainly nothing could be worth suffering through such uncomfortable and humiliating topics for hours on end. And while Don might not *intend* for any part of it to be humiliating… well, Leo knew his *other* two brothers well enough to expect the worst. Things were going to get very inappropriate very quickly...

"All I'm sayin'," Raphael was still arguing, "is why don't you just STOP treating us like morons, skip the god damned basics, and *cut to the fucking chase already!* "

"It's very important to start with the basics any time you are learning something new," Donatello explained, using that patient and condescending voice that Raph had come to despise over the course of Leo's absence.

Raphael shoved up off the couch, taking to his feet in an abrupt and explosive motion that his brothers were all quick to recognize. It was not the deadly crouch-and-lunge that might have signified he was getting up to pummel someone, but they could still interpret it as

plainly as if he'd just come right out and announced it. *Hey guys, just so you know? I'm about to be a dick.*

"And how are *you* supposed to know what is or isn't new to me, huh? How are you gonna stand there and talk like you know what's new for ANY of us?" He was up in Donatello's personal space now, puffed up and dripping with machismo. "You got spy cameras set up around the lair now? Maybe drilled some tracking devices into our shells while we were fast asleep?"

"Do you really expect me to waste my breath answering any of that? Look, I'm sorry that I'm such an obvious threat to your manhood, Raph. But if it's okay, I'd rather just stand here and wait for you to run out of preposterous accusations."

"Oh yeah, that must be it. I'm just so threatened by you, Donnie. HA! No, seriously. Y'wanna talk accusations? Like, how about this big unspoken one you got hangin' over us right now, draggin' us into this 'let's talk about the birds and the bees' bullshit, like we couldn't possibly figure it out! I mean, wasn't nobody holding your hand. And —"

Don shook his head, murmuring softly, "You should stop right there. I would have been grateful for someone – if there'd been *anyone* who could have…"

Raph rolled his eyes heavenward, cutting him off. "Yeah, well - you're a puss. Ain't our fault."

The more cocky and center-stage Raph got, the more Don seemed to draw back and shrink in on himself. This made the exchange very frustrating for Leonardo to watch, and he found himself checking a ridiculous urge to start coaching Donnie on the spot. *Stop. That. Cowering. It only makes him worse, Donnie! He's slowly herding you backwards. Probably on purpose. You know that, right? Plant your feet. Plant. Them. And for Pete's sake, STOP LOOKING AT THEM.*

"Where do you get off, talkin' like we don't know nothin' at all? For all *you* know, it was fucking *Girls Gone Wild* up in here the other night. Mike and I were just *drownin'* in drunk-ass bitches." He threw up his hands to indicate the lair around them. "Swear to god, cameras and bouncin', beer-drenched titties everywhere!"

Michelangelo was highly entertained by these dramatics, watching with the same rapt gaze and open-mouthed grin that he typically wore for really good action-movie fight scenes or a Breaking News Bulletin covering the latest Justice Force versus evildoers smack-down. Also, he was secretly basking in an absurd swell of appreciation over the fact that Raph had claimed him as a fellow participant and perpetrator for these Girls Gone Wild parties. So what if they were imaginary? It was still pretty cool.

"You know, the whole night we kept thinkin' to ourselves, man! Really too bad ya had to MISS it! But I guess that's just what ya get when ya stay locked up in your room, doin' who-knows-what for ten hours straight with the goddamn sound proof light on!"

"Girls Gone Wild, huh?" Donatello scoffed, folding his arms across his chest defensively and canting his head towards Raphael. "Well, forgive me if I suspend my belief until the evidence comes out on DVD."

"So where was I during this Girls Gone Wild party?" Leo wanted to know.

Mikey jumped in now, rolling his shoulders in an exaggerated show of nonchalance, "Y'know, the usual. You snuck off to the Foot Headquarters and spent the whole night bangin' the snot outta Karai."

"Oh, right," Leonardo murmured, ticking one corner of his lips in a half-smile. "Same old same old, I guess."

"And by 'bangin'… of *course* Mikey means a long, sweaty session of completely plutta… like, completely non-sexual sparring."

"Platonic," Don offered automatically in a bored tone of voice.

"That too."

Mike leaned over to cup his hand near his mouth and remind Raph in a stage-whisper, "Well, there was that *one time* when she let him lick her boots clean. I heard he might've even got some toe-sucking action."

"All right," Leo warned, eyes flashing with insult, "that's enough of that, Mikey."

But of course Raphael happily ran with it. "Oh yeah! The deal was that afterwards she was honor-bound to "polish his sword"... yanno, jus' to return the favor? So, naturally, it came as a HUGE surprise to us all when she jus' laughed and – I dunno, kicked him in the face."

Leonardo set his tea cup down on the ground very slowly. Then he sat back and, using the cover of the blanket still draped over him, clasped his hands on his lap. He didn't close his eyes but ceased to see through them in those next few moments. Leo was summoning centering imagery, calling upon a few of his favorites, one after the other. Serene, billowing clouds hanging like mountains in a summer sky. Gentle slopes of gleaming untouched snow pouring over the arctic. A span of arid desert sands swept into ripples by the wind.

No reaction. Give him no reaction at all.

They were all looking at him now to see if he'd snap. Leo waited long enough to summon back his calm, but not long enough for Raphael to rally his next attack. When he spoke up at last, his tone was nearly genial. "Well, whatever I was allegedly up to, it can't have been better than a Girls Gone Wild party. For the next one, I expect a courtesy call on the shell cell so I can haul myself back home in time, or somebody's getting their shell kicked."

This was not only effective in shutting down Raphael's bullying, it even seemed to impress him enough to earn a sly grin. "Fair 'nuff."

Donatello, on the other hand, did not appear to be impressed. He was pushing his fingers into his sinuses and looking quite stressed, actually. Taking advantage of the silence (which he assumed was just a temporary lull, after which the insanity would doubtless continue), he stepped forward to interject, speaking somewhat rapidly, "All right, guys? As much as I'd love to sit around all day discussing Leonardo's foot fetishes and indulging your twisted fantasies about filling our top secret lair with intoxicated college girls… I do still have a lesson to teach. And quite a lot of material left to cover. So if we could please—"

"Nah, sorry," Raphael interrupted, driving his shoulder towards Donatello to roughly shove him aside. "You're fired. All right class, now listen up cause I'm takin' over! I want yer eyes on me so I can make this short and sweet."

Leonardo was watching him warily. Donatello was grinding his teeth together. Michelangelo was biting down on the heel of his palm in what looked like an effort not to collapse in a fit of giggles. But since technically everyone *was* looking at him, Raphael gave a satisfied nod and decided to continue.

Jerking a thumb over one shoulder, he bellowed, "Basics a' Sexuality!" He paused for dramatic effect, eyeing them. "Now ya gotta pay attention, cause I'm only doin' this once. Everybody watchin' close? Okay. It goes like this."

First, he held up his left hand in front of them and formed a circle by touching his fingers lightly to his thumb.

Then he closed his right hand into a fist and held that up too.

He paused to smirk at them before performing the final step of his demonstration: punching his fist through the circle, a sudden and brutal gesture. With his left hand now pinching his right arm just above the wrist, he held up the demonstrative gesture a little and gave them all ample time to digest it.

Then Raphael arched his brow ridges and grinned wickedly. "Any questions?"

"No, Raph," Leonardo chuckled. "Actually, that was perfectly clear."

"I'm not sure I would call… *that...* sexuality," Donatello spat quietly, each word heavy with rancor. "But it was most certainly basic."

"Got the point across, didn't it? And we didn't even have to sit around for hours hearin' blah blah blah."

Don's eyes were narrowed on Raphael with such undisguised antipathy that both Mike and Leo noticed it immediately, and were somewhat taken aback.

Leonardo frowned, furrowing his brow in thought for a moment. Then he spoke up to offer a careful blend of constructive criticism and encouragement. "Hey Don? Now that Raph's got that burning desire to contribute out of his system, let's go on with your lesson, okay? And please try not to mind us for being a little hard on you. We're sorry, I guess we're all just a little stir crazy from that anatomy lecture, but we don't really mean anything by it…"

At this point Raph threw an annoyed scowl in Leo's direction; he did not appreciate other people including him in their blanket-statement apologies –especially not when he'd gone to so much trouble spreading chaos in the first place. There was also the minor fact that he was not yet feeling even the slightest bit sorry. Leonardo added insult to injury by missing Raph's poisonous glare completely. He was on a roll, apparently, still blathering on in the nicest way possible about why Don's *next* lesson might not necessarily be a total snooze-fest.

Raphael gave up and returned to the couch, hunkering down low in the cushions and letting his restless gaze roam around. He sat there working up a decent sulk, drumming his knuckles impatiently and raking his attention over pretty much anything in the lair that wasn't in Leo and Don's general direction. And if anyone had still been

paying attention to him at this point, the message would have been clear: *Whatever. La-la-la, I am tuning you out.*

"But considering all the medical jargon involved and trying to tell this blob from that blob on a chart, I suspect it was doomed from the start to be dry and difficult subject matter. It's just complicated by its very nature, which is probably not going to be the case for…"Leo glanced back up at the topic Don had written across the top of the white board, "this, uh… Basics of Sexuality stuff." *Whatever that's supposed to mean.*

"I'll do what I can," Donatello said without confidence, his voice still clipped with irritation – but at least it was no longer dripping with contempt. His eyes had lost that gleam of barely-checked indignation, which was a relief to both Leo and Mike. Especially Mike.

Both empathic by nature and having lived with Donnie all their lives, these two had long ago discovered one important fact about dealing with an angry Donatello. That is to say, there was a direct correlation between how pissed off Don got and how likely he was to stop speaking English mid-sentence and revert back to his native tongue. Leonardo had coined it "Donspeak". Raphael was quick to adopt the term, and eventually - through him – so did Casey. Even Master Splinter made use of it recently, much to everyone's amusement. Of course, April never said it. But that came as no surprise, since she was one of the only people they knew who spoke Donspeak quite fluently.

In spite of all this support for Leo's term, Mike was convinced that he'd come up with a better name for the phenomenon. Even now, years later, he stubbornly persisted in calling it the 'Pretentious and Intellectually Superior Unnecessarily Obscure and Overly Complicated Unpronounceable Geektacular Language of Retardedly Super Long Really Big Words.'

Meanwhile, Donatello had always been a master when it came to governing his emotions. Though he'd replied a bit sourly, he was still

absorbing the things Leo was saying, willing himself to be calmed and affected by his brother's rationale. He caught his youngest brother looking his way with only partial focus, his gaze mostly turned inward. He tried flashing Mike his typical 'I'll-be-fine' smile, but the kid didn't react, clearly wrapped up in his own thoughts. Moving to the folding table and picking up a page from his notes, he reoriented himself with the task at hand.

Of course, he had no way of knowing that Mike was considering the potentially damaging impact P.I.S.U.O.O.C.U.G.L.R.S.L.R.B.W. might have on him when used in the context of sex education (whenever people tried to point out that his acronym was no good because it was too long and impossible to say, Mike would cheerfully explain that these were the very reasons it was *perfect).* Hopefully he'd just get too lost to follow one bit of it, but he wasn't completely ruling out the possibility of permanent psychological damage or any number of lingering sexual hang-ups that could result. There was no doubt that his brainiac brother's expansive knowledge and vast verbal arsenal included many things that Mike would *really* rather not know. Surely Don could engineer descriptions and ugly technicalities for any number of bodily functions or sexual acts, and with a few choice words render them so completely and utterly unsexy that poor Michelangelo would spend the rest of his life haunted by their disturbing mental imagery. Night terrors and nervous tics, or he might start twitching and go into spastic fits at the very th—

"EARTH TO MIKEY! Come in, Mikey!"

"Oh," Michelangelo blinked at Don a few times, then spread a lopsided grin. "Sorry. Were you saying something?"

"I was certainly *trying* ," Don smirked, rapping his knuckles on Mikey's brow once in gentle reprimand. "You ought to pay better attention. Especially now. Because *the time has come* , Mikey! That very moment you've been waiting for, since yesterday."

At this, Mike's brow knitted with confusion. He spent the next several beats just staring at Don with his mouth slightly open, wearing a

stupid look on his face. Then he suddenly pulled up out of his slouch to sit forward eagerly, his eyes flying wide with realization. A huge and endearing grin spilled onto his face like the sun pouring out from behind the clouds. "You mean it's time for… DISPLAY D?" he beamed.

"If you please," Don confirmed fondly, gesturing towards the whiteboard with an open palm.

"Sweeeeeeet!" Mike crooned in approval, bouncing off the armrest of the couch. "I'll go get her!"

In no time flat, Display D was plastered prominently in the center of Donnie's white-board. "All right class," he introduced her with a vague wave of his hand, "I'd like you all to meet my good friend, Jenna Jameson."

Leo stared at the picture. Then he stared at Donnie for a moment, before shaking his head with a sigh. "You know, when I said this lecture might not be as dry… Jenna here is not what I had in mind."

"This is just a visual reference point for discussing what… um, could possibly be… er, done with a lady," Don tried gamely to defend the display, but his confidence seemed to be wavering.

"Say, Don?" Mike wondered, "Not that I'm really complaining here… Cause like, whoa. This Lesson just officially got off to a kick ass start! But – f'real, how basic are we talkin'? Cause… dude, I gotta tell you. I'm pretty sure none of us are *that* clueless. I know I already got some pretty good ideas 'bout what *I'd* do with her."

Don chuckled. "Is that so? I suppose you think you can do a better job than Raph's sorry attempt to prove expertise on the subject?"

"Totally," Mike assured him, bobbing his head in cheery assent. "Everything I need to know about sex, I learned from Outkast!"

Raphael groaned, "Here we go…"

Michelangelo was already up on his feet, using one nunchaku as a microphone and singing his heart out. "I don't wanna meetchya daddy! I just wantcha in my caddy! I don't wanna meetchya momma! I just wanna make ya come-uh!"

He was getting all kinds of looks from his brothers now. But that only made a perfect set-up for the next line, so he gave them a theatric shrug and continued blithely. "I'm – I'm just bein' honest, oh-ohh!"

Don had his arms folded over his chest again, and lowered his chin warningly to ask, "Are you quite finished?"

"Actually, there's like three more stanzas!"

" *Sit."*

"Ok, ok, I'm goin'…" Mike laughed, trudging back to his place on the armrest of the couch. "I guess that concludes my contribution, guys. Uh, any questions?"

Leo spoke up, quiet and conversational, "Just one, Mikey."

"Eh?" Mike hadn't actually been expecting questions, and looked at Leo with some confusion.

"What IS cooler than being cool?"

Mike grinned hugely, squinting his eyes shut and shooting one fist up into the air as he crowed, "ICE COLD!!"

Don face-palmed, " *Please* do not encourage him."

"Too late," Raphael observed. Mike was already out of his seat and head-banging the next part.

"Awwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwrightawwright!"

Raphael had heard enough by now. "MIKE! Shut your face!"

The chaos only escalated from there. Soon it had grown to such a cacophony that it could be heard throughout the lair, drawing their sensei out from his private chambers to investigate. He appeared at the edge of the common room and surveyed the scene, though no one immediately noticed him.

Raphael had wrestled Mike to the ground by this point and was repeatedly grinding his face into the rug, each shove made to the rhythm of the words he was now yelling at the top of his lungs, "SHAKE IT SHAKE IT SHAKE IT!"

"OW! Someone! GITTEM! Rrrg! GITTEM! Unf! OFF ME! ARRGHH!"

"SILENCE!" Splinter shouted, punctuating the command by bringing his walking staff down with a crack.

The whole room froze.

Looking around slowly, the rat frowned at each of them with disapproval. His glittering black eyes stopped to linger most critically on the lesson's supposed instructor. "I expected you to conduct this lesson with more discipline, Donatello," he said, keeping his voice low and very even. They knew that voice well. It meant he was trying not to shout at them.

"I'm sorry, Master Splinter!" Donatello spoke in a rush, his eyes going huge with apology. He blushed hotly and dropped his eyes to the floor. "I swear I have been trying to take this task seriously. Things just… things got out of hand!"

Raphael was helping Mike up off the floor now, and both of them had the decency to look guilty. Michelangelo spoke up sheepishly, "Hey, uh – don't blame Donnie, 'kay? That was totally my bad."

Don flashed his brother a tiny smile of thanks, but it was quick to fade when he looked back at Splinter. His sensei was still giving him a look that clearly held him the most responsible.

Splinter drifted nearer then, his brow furrowed and his tail lashing irritably. One hand was clasping his half-staff, the other braced at the small of his back. He seemed to be coming out to lecture them, but by the slow way he was approaching Leonardo guessed that he was probably still formulating what to say to them right there on the spot. Having finally latched on something, the old rat opened his mouth as if about to speak… then promptly lost whatever he'd been about to say.

He was staring at the white-board.

Particularly, he was staring at the prominently positioned display tacked up on said white-board, the one featuring a cheerfully posing, completely nude porn star. Jenna Jameson was standing there with her feet spaced apart to show off the contours of her long, shapely legs. She was also hoisting up her generous breasts with both hands and throwing the camera a saucy wink.

Splinter had his back to them now. He continued to stare.

"I-I promise, it's… it's relevant!" Don squeaked.

From further behind him, Donnie's star pupils were all lined up now, sitting properly side-by-side on the couch. Suddenly they were all displaying excellent posture and attentiveness. The three even managed to remain almost completely silent, excepting only the occasional choke and splutter that escaped their sudden, very desperate efforts *not* to laugh. Even Leonardo was starting to doubt whether his serene clouds and snow banks could possibly save him this time.

"Relevant," Splinter repeated, somewhat dryly. Slowly, he turned back to his sons and stared them down. "Ah. How strange. My morning appetite, it seems to have vanished! Yes. Suddenly, it seems to me this is a fine morning to sleep in, after all." He looked back over his shoulder to give Display D one last, mildly disturbed glance. "Please… try and behave, my children," Splinter sighed as he turned away from them. "I am going back to bed." He walked off

then, muttering under his breath in Japanese and shaking his head slowly.

Take Five

Chapter 7: Take Five

"Alright, it's almost ten o'clock. We haven't even *started* lesson two yet, and you guys are already wearing me out. So, let's take five. That will give me a chance to hit the kitchen for something caffeinated, and maybe then I'll have a better chance of actually getting through this with my sanity intact." Donatello's tone was clipped, surveying his three brothers. He picked up his page of notes and took them with him as he stalked out of the room.

They spent most of the first minute in silence. Raphael's eyes lanced about the room in a restless way that matched his pacing thoughts. Michelangelo seemed content and quite entertained just to sit and contemplate the lovely assets of Miss Jameson. Leonardo maintained a carefully blank expression, his gaze fixed on some indeterminate point on the floor in front of him.

Raph finally broke the silence, looking Leo over for a moment before leaning in to catch his older brother's gaze. "How're ya feelin'?"

"A little better, I guess," Leo muttered. "Not as queasy."

"Headache?"

"Yeah."

"Izz'it bad?"

The elder brother lowered his chin in a single minute nod.

"Mikey!" Raph snapped. "Wipe that drool off yer chin and make yourself useful, wouldja? Go get Leo some aspirin or something."

"Yeah, yeah." Mike hadn't been drooling! The truth was he'd been listening to their whole weird exchange. Irritation flared up in him, as

he realized he still wasn't completely over being excluded by them last night. While he'd mostly been able to put it all behind him this morning and greet the day with a good attitude, their being so nice to each other felt like they were rubbing it in. Either that, or they were throwing him out of the room. Neither option really left him feeling warm and fuzzy towards them, so in retaliation he grumbled sourly as he rose, "Try not to make out while I'm gone, eh?"

"You little twerp!" Raphael took immediate offense to this, balling his hands into fists and starting to rise. Mike yelped and darted out of reach, eyeing him warily as Raph snarled, "Yeah, you better move! I oughta knock your teeth right outta your face!"

"You *are* being almost civil to me lately," Leo pointed out in a voice meant to calm him, almost smiling. "It's kind of unsettling."

"Yeah, well." Raph scowled, giving Mike one last glare before sinking back down onto the couch. Folding his arms, he noted grudgingly, "You're being almost cool lately. That's kind of unsettling too."

"Don't worry," Leo sighed, looking away. "I'm sure it won't last."

Raphael turned fully at this, like there was something he wanted to say. But either he couldn't find the words, or couldn't bring himself to speak them. He looked away.

Weirdos, Mike decided, heading out towards the kitchen. He would never figure those two out. But he paused just out of sight and lingered to listen, just in case they really were trying to get him out of the room for some reason.

After a moment, he heard Raph speak. "You kinda confused me back there," he said quietly, "when Don was tryin' to give his lesson. One minute it'd be like you were supporting him, and the next you were cuttin' him down with the rest of us."

Cutting him down? Is that what I was doing? Mike thought back over his behavior. He hadn't really meant it that way. *I mean sure, the*

anatomy stuff was really boring, but… I was just goofing off! It was no different than how he normally acted during lessons. But then, most lessons weren't taught by Don. He glanced towards the kitchen, wondering about it. Could he have upset his brother by accident?

Leo took some time to think about Raph's observation before responding, "I wanted it over with. That doesn't necessarily mean I was supporting him."

"Huh. So… it's pissin' you off too?"

"No. Yeah." He sighed again. "I don't know, Raph. It could just be that I'm cranky right now. But a part of me feels like… we don't need to hear it. Any of it."

"No kiddin'. Not to mention it's gonna put all kinds of funny ideas in Mike's head. He don't need that…"

What the HELL? Mike fumed at this, and was sorely tempted to burst back into the room and refute it. *Like I need Don for that! I am perfectly capable of putting funny ideas into my OWN head!* Okay, wait... Maybe that wasn't the best leading argument. *The point is, I'm not that much younger than they are! I'm definitely not some baby who needs to be sheltered. Where do they get off?*

"What's the purpose? That's what I want to know. I'm sorry, but I'm not rushing out any time soon to – to go out and 'score with chicks'. And so far, I don't really appreciate any of this. Call me overly focused, or whatever you want, but – right now my priorities are on being a *ninja* ."

"I'm not callin' you *anything* , bro," Raphael insisted quietly. "For once, I'm right there with you."

"I don't know if there's anything I can do about it, though. Don's in charge right now."

"What if we *both* went to Splinter? Told him we both think this whole thing is just stupid?"

"I don't know, Raph. Maybe. But for right now, let's just wait and see it how it goes, okay?"

"You know what I think of his so-called leadership, Leo. He doesn't even—"

Michelangelo withdrew then, suddenly glad they'd given him the excuse to leave. If they were plotting some kind of revolt against Donnie, he didn't want any part of it. He made a silent dash for the kitchen.

Bursting into the room, he found Don at the breakfast table, frowning down at his notes and nursing one of his blue energy drinks. "Soda for breakfast?" he criticized, peering. "I know we're still out of coffee filters, but there *is* tea…"

Donatello slid the drink closer protectively, like Mike might try to snatch it away from him. Then he grinned sheepishly, defending, "This is more *efficient."*

"Well, so is hooking yourself up to some kind of creepy caffeine IV drip," Mike argued wryly. "But try it, bro, and I'll have to kick your ass. How 'bout I make you some toast?"

"Really, I'm fine…"

"Dude, breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Are we gonna hafta battle over this? Cause, you know, I am the Battle Nexus Champion. And I say you need toast."

"Okay, okay!" Don put up both hands in defeat. "I yield. Toast sounds great. I am at your mercy."

Mike grinned at him. He turned and went about getting bread from the cupboard, as well as some butter and strawberry jam from out of

the fridge. Don eyed the jam and nearly said something, but seemed to think better of it and went back to studying his notes.

While the bread was toasting, Mike came back over to the table and sat down in one of the chairs next to him. "Hey Donnie, I was just wondering… Are you mad at me?"

"No, Mike. Did I act mad? I'm probably just stressed. This isn't exactly the easiest lesson to teach."

"But you believe in it, right?"

Don canted him a strangely grave look before dropping his eyes down to his notes. "Yeah," he said softly. "I mean, Splinter did sort of rope me into all this. But yeah, Mike, I do. I think it's really important."

"Well, I just wanted to say that if you believe in it, then… then I believe in it too! Because... I believe in you, so. So I'm gonna to try to be good from now on."

Don's head shot up at this. He blinked at Michelangelo in surprise.

Mike wet his lips before pressing on, determined. "I'm not promising I'll be perfect, right? Especially considering all the kindsa stuff we're probably gonna have to talk about. 'Cause, dude, some things just *gotta be said* , you know? But— but I'm gonna do better. Really. I was never tryin' to, um, cut you down. And I just wanna make sure you know that. Okay?" He gave Don his best wide-eyed, 'so that's why you shouldn't be mad at me' puppy dog look.

Donatello considered him quietly. Eventually his fingers made a beckoning motion, and he mumbled, "Come here, you."

"Huh?" Mike gave him an uncertain look but humored him, leaning in a little.

"Closer," Don commanded gently.

Michelangelo obeyed, his confusion growing – especially when Don reached out and started prodding and poking at the top of his head. "Uh, bro? What the heck are you *doing* ?"

"Checking for antennae," Donatello explained patiently. "Or some kind of alien implant… No, hold still!" He laughed and caught Mike in a headlock when the younger turtle tried to squirm away. "I've almost got it!"

"GACK!" Mike protested, held in place from his own fit of giggles now as much as by Don's efforts.

"Yep, this must be it. Riiiight here."

"That's my *Adam's apple* , you – you mad scientist!" Mike choked, twisting and flailing. "Haha, get OFFA me—!"

"I'm sorry, but we'll have to amputate. It's our only option. WE HAVE NO CHOICE!"

"AHHHHHH," Mike girly-screamed, clawing at Don's arms now.

"Weirdos," a voice grumped from behind them. They both froze at the interruption and then twisted around to see Raphael surveying both of them critically from the frame of the kitchen's entrance.

He did not look amused.

Striding past them, he went to the medicine cabinet and opened it with more noise than was necessary, letting the door swing wide to crash against the neighboring cupboard. The bottle of aspirin, too, was swiped up in one fist in a way that made the pills inside clatter loudly. He took a bottle of water from the fridge, and shot Michelangelo a particularly black look as he strode past them again.

"I didn't forget!" Mike squeaked, even though he had. "I just, I said some things, and then Donnie had to make sure I wasn't a pod person!"

"All true," Don agreed solemnly.

"But after that, I was totally gonna!"

Raph ignored all of this. On his way out he paused in the frame of the entryway to throw a dirty look over one shoulder. This time it was for Donatello. "Oh, and it's been five minutes," he growled. "Just so you know." Then he turned and was gone.

The exchange pretty much killed the jovial mood in the kitchen. Don collected his notes and his energy drink quickly, mumbling, "Guess we'd better get back in there."

Michelangelo followed Don back out into the common room, hanging his head a bit. It was only as he was getting resituated on the armrest of the couch, and Don was taking his place at the front of the room, that Mike realized he'd neglected more than just Leo's aspirin.

He'd also managed to completely forget the toast.

Discussing Display D

AN: Sorry for how long this one took, guys. Got caught up writing some one-shots... I think it came out pretty funny so hopefully it's worth the wait! XD Thanks Greenwillow for the beta read, and thanks to the tarts for letting me bounce ideas off you. Thanks to Stealthy Stories folks for supplying a bunch of weird slang words for breasts. Haha, you guys are the best.

XOXO

Winnychan

Chapter 8 – Basics of Sexuality: Discussing Display D

Donatello drained the rest of his energy drink and tossed the dark blue bottle into the waste bin before making his way back into position at the head of the class. Standing before the whiteboard once again, he surveyed his 'students' uneasily. At least two of them met his gaze with equal reluctance.

And Mikey, bless his good intentions, was still going to be a loose cannon at best. Just as Don opened his mouth to begin, he even demonstrated the fact by suddenly leaping up from his seat, hollering, "TOOOOAAAST!" at the top of his lungs, and rocketing out of the room without a word of further explanation.

"The hell…?" Raphael wondered, squinting after him.

"Well." Leonardo leaned in to suggest in a droll tone, "I'd say it's either his latest battle cry, or he didn't get enough to eat for breakfast."

Don sighed, watching Mike tear off with a mixture of frustration and fondness. "No. I believe that would be my toast."

"Oh, so Mikey's rejoined the crusade?" Leo wondered, straightening one of his wrist guards idly. "Good to know."

"Far as I can tell, he never left it," Don returned evenly. It wasn't hard to deduce where Leonardo was heading with this. It was not his favorite subject.

"Next weigh-in is less than a week away," he went on to remind Don for what felt like the eleventh or twelfth time this week. Logically, Don knew it couldn't really have been as frequently as that. But Leo made mention of it often enough that he felt justified in calling his brother's interest 'excessive'. As well as a few more colorful terms best kept to himself.

"Yes, Leo," Don muttered. "I'm aware."

"If Mikey's been as diligent as you both claim, hopefully we'll see some results this time." Leo veiled his threat in a very casual tone, but he wasn't fooling anyone. Lately he'd been making it obvious that he'd come to regret having delegated the matter, believing Mike's methods were far too lenient.

Geez. Even Raph's smirk seemed to hold as much sympathy as amusement – which was saying something, considering how he'd howled with laughter during that *first* weigh-in.

No one had been more taken aback by it than Donatello himself. His family had been considerably more aware of this than he had been, and uncomfortably skirting the issue. Leonardo, however, confronted it head-on. He'd been ruthless in driving them all up onto the scale to face the cold, hard evidence. The proof was rather indisputable. Don was now twelve pounds lighter than even his little brother Mikey.

Considering Mike's shorter stature and naturally slim physique, not to mention the fact that Don was the tallest – well, it was obvious enough to him now, not to mention hugely embarrassing. Clearly the difference had to do with muscle mass. Mike's arms and legs were

all hard, corded muscle, and one only had to feel them each flex in turn to note the considerable difference.

Splinter had little choice but to declare him officially underweight by the team's standards. Standards which were admittedly high, he'd gone on to point out kindly, and Donatello did appreciate his sensei's efforts to soften the blow. But ultimately Splinter made it clear that because they were whole again and fighting as a team, some improvement was now expected.

It wasn't enough that he was still in better shape than ninety-five percent of New York. Don knew that being twelve pounds lighter than the smallest of them was pretty inexcusable. He got that. He really did. But did Leo have to keep putting it in his face?

Mike returned, and Don was suddenly grateful to see his toast had been slathered with such ridiculous, heaping gobs of butter and strawberry jam. *Maybe this will shut Leo up.* He accepted the plate with a forced smile. Michelangelo returned it, easy and genuine. Then he ate both pieces quickly, forcing them down in silence, careful not to look at any of them as he struggled to center himself. *Ugh... like* s *ticky sweet strawberry syrup on a stale slice of sandpaper.*

He heard his oldest brother grunt approvingly and had to bite his tongue to stay silent. Donatello refused to let the satisfaction everyone got from watching him eat a damned piece of toast incense him any further! He could not afford to let his brothers get to him. He must remain calm and collected throughout this lesson if he were to have any hope at all of getting through it.

Setting his plate down and dusting his fingers off, Don glanced over his shoulder to look at Jenna. At least *she* still looked enthusiastic about all of this.

"Basics of sexuality," he announced, having mentally prepared himself for a second attempt. Donatello glanced warily at his brothers, but no one interrupted him this time. "I'd like us to start just

by having a talk about Jenna here," he explained, summoning a relaxed demeanor and trying his best to sound at ease. It wasn't easy. Inside he was cringing, feeling painfully shy under the weight of their expectant stares. "You know, um - what do we like about her? What don't we like about her? Basically I'd like to see us try to get comfortable talking about this stuff."

"Ohh, ohh!" Michelangelo wanted to be called upon. He sat up straighter on the armrest with his hand in the air, waving it around anxiously. "Pick me! I know this one!" he begged, squirming and bouncing in place.

"Go ahead, Mikey," Don humored him.

"I like her boobies," he declared matter-of-factly, adopting a voice that meant to sound scholarly – though he couldn't help spreading that huge grin of his. He paused to consider Ms. Jameson again, tapping his chin seriously and then holding up one finger to add, with the utmost certainty, "Like, a lot. I would even go so far as to describe them as rather – ginormous. And therefore inherently – uh, super dope." He beamed.

Don found himself unexpectedly cheered up by this enthusiastic playacting and flashed his youngest brother an honest, fleeting grin. "I don't think any of us are really too surprised to hear it, Mikey."

"Well, *shyeah!* " Mike cried with feeling, dropping the role and launching to his feet in a single smooth hop - all the while perched on the couch's armrest, but his perfect balance and casual confidence made it look easy. He flung his hands towards the whiteboard, directing their attention towards Display D with several wild and emphatic gestures, "I mean… I mean, would'ja just look at 'em? They're all kinds of awesome!"

"Heh. Yep! They're... pretty huge, all right," Don agreed, clearing his throat to cover his laughter. "So – Mike likes her boobs. Which of you wants to go next?"

Silence.

He considered them both before deciding to pick on the one who'd just been hounding him about the weigh-in. "How about you, Leo? Care to give us your answer?"

Clearly Leo hadn't expected to be singled out. He gave Don a series of blinks before agreeing slowly, "I – uh – sure."

"Great, let's hear it," Don encouraged. "What do *you* like about Jenna?"

"Actually," Leonardo clarified, shooting Jenna a look of distaste, "this would be for the *other* category."

"Should've seen that coming," Don smirked. "But, sure. Let's hear it. What don't you like about her?"

"Well, she looks kind of…" Leo paused to rephrase what he'd been about to say. "She's not exactly…" He trailed off again, his gaze having drifted towards Display D. Then he shook his head and squared his shoulders stubbornly. "There's no polite way to say it. She's a prostitute, Don. Now, do you *really* want me to get more specific?"

"I did mean *physically* ," Don corrected. "So – yes! If you could, that would be great. Besides, she's not a prostitute, Leo. She's an actress in the adult entertainment industry. There's a difference."

"She gets paid to have sex with strangers."

"Oka-ay," Don allowed, drawing out the word a bit. Then he said, using the tech support voice he reserved for his least rational customers, "Fine. Jenna's a whore, and you've made your point. Now, can we try to leave morality out of it, just for a bit, and focus on her physical traits, please?"

Leo narrowed his eyes at that. "Don, if there's no place for morality or strong principles in what you would consider the basics of sex, then I have *serious issues* with this lesson of yours."

Don raised his brow ridges to regard Leonardo with long-suffering disbelief. "Uh, right." He glanced towards Mike and Raph. "Wait 'til you're married, kids."

"Very funny, Don," Leo warned over his younger brothers' snickers.

"Warn her before the big finish? Always offer to sleep on the wet spot?" Don parted his hands in dismay. "What do you *want* from me here, Leo?"

"All I'm saying is, can you show some decorum? Take it a little more seriously, at least."

"Oh, that's just great. You and everybody else seemed to agree that my anatomy lesson was too dry! So let me get this straight. I'm supposed to make sure it's *interesting* , yet serious – as well as morally upstanding. I'm pretty sure Mike prefers we keep things light, and try to have fun with it. And Raph wants…"

"Raph wants it over with," the slouching turtle grumped.

Don ignored this, stabbing a finger in his direction and pressing on. " *Raph* asked that I not make any quick assumptions, and try not to talk down to him. Correct?"

Raph considered this before hitching a nonchalant shrug, "Yeah."

Don gave a single nod before whirling on 'Fearless' to continue his appeal. "So you *see* , Leo - I just don't think he's going to appreciate it very much if I stand up here and say something like, "Oh, by the way! And this is a really important step, guys. Always remember to go ahead and *obtain her consent first* !"

Leo said nothing, pressing his mouth into a straight line. More than anything, he hated being mocked.

Had he been given a verbal reply to work with, Don was convinced he could have held his own against Leo for a little while longer at least. As it was, he'd said pretty much everything that needed to be said. And since he'd rather not move on to the ugly things that still WANTED to be said, he didn't see much choice but to engage Leo in his stupid alpha-wolf stare down, or whatever this was supposed to be.

He did not endure Leo's gaze for very long before starting to feel physically ill. It was especially irritating because Don knew – knew for a FACT – that it was a biological impossibility. Leo's stare alone could not command his stomach acids to suddenly retaliate against the foreign invaders of toast and jelly. Just the same, a vile mouthful hit the back of his throat, making him grimace as he swallowed it down again.

His posture deflated a little, and he frowned at the floor. Suddenly, more than anything, Donatello was aware of how much he did not want to face off against Leo. He thought of the stress and strife this was causing him, considered the potential for bruised feelings or newly formed grudges…

And like always, proving himself right was just not a big enough reward for him to endure it.

"I haven't forgotten how to tell right from wrong, Leo," he assured his righteous-minded sibling quietly. "And I'm pretty sure Mike and Raph haven't either. But if you really need me to address that aspect more, then – why don't we have a brief talk about it, just the two of us, after I'm done with this section? I'll go over the whole lesson plan with you, and you can – I don't know, tell me what you think needs to be said."

Leo frowned – a mild and thoughtful frown, and ultimately a good sign. He was considering Don's compromise. He looked down at his

kneepads for a moment before ducking his head in a single nod and then looking over at Jenna. "Physical trait, huh?"

Don hadn't realized the tension he'd been holding in his shoulders until those words released it. "Yeah."

"Okay, I've got one. I think this counts as physical, anyway, but-" his tone went wry again, "-just how much of her body IS made of silicone, do you think?"

Don blinked once, amusement ticking over his face. "I'd say, ahh – twelve percent?" It was a blatant over-estimation, but quite purposeful – his subtle acknowledgement of Leo's answer as the same complaint he would have given if asked to criticize the porn star's appearance. One of his more elusive smiles curled the corners of his mouth up at the edges as he referred back to Display D and nodded, "Yeah. Twelve percent, at least."

"So wait," Mike piped up, never one to catch on quickly. "You mean… they aren't real?"

"'Fraid not, Mikey. It's not to say that breasts don't ever come in that size naturally, but they're rare. And they'd normally be found on much bigger girls than Jenna, here. A girl's breast size is usually a bit more proportionate to the rest of her body. Also, they'd hang a lot lower than these do."

"Ain't hangin'," Raph mumbled, though Don suspected he hadn't meant to say anything aloud. He straightened and a startled look crossed his face briefly, as if embarrassed to be caught looking like he was actually interested and following along with the class.

"Sorry – what was that, Raph?"

"They ain't hangin'," he repeated, giving them all a black scowl but at least doing them the favor of enunciating some of his words this time. "How you gonna say they're hanging like they're fake, when she's got 'em in her hands and holdin' 'em up like that?"

"Well, I have, uh." Donatello pointed towards the 'Booty Drive' sitting on the desk and grinned sheepishly, "Multiple references? If you'd care to see a few better examples, it would just take a moment to find them. I might even have some video clips that could illustrate the difference in the way breast implants jiggle compared to—"

"That's QUITE ALL RIGHT, Don," Leonardo interjected bitterly, with such force that Michelangelo started giggling behind one of his hands.

"Fine then," Don grinned. "Guys, looks like you'll just have to take my word for it. Mike?"

"Yessir?" Mike straightened eagerly.

"Tell us that part you liked again?"

"Boobies!" he crooned.

"That's the one." Don started to write this word out on the whiteboard, but his marker paused upon hearing an amused snort behind him. "Yes, Raph?" he sighed, not bothering to turn around.

"Ya sure *that's* the official vocab you're wantin' us all to memorize for the big test, teach?" Raphael queried lazily from where he was slumped and taking up more than his fair share of couch space. "Cause, I gotta tell ya. I don't think I've used that word since I was… dunno, nine? Maybe ten years old?"

"Mmn. Good point, Raph," Don called back to him, not looking up from where he was now completing the word 'BOOBIES' on the white-board, off to the left of Display D. Then he straightened, studying it approvingly before turning to address Raphael directly. "And what would you have us call them?"

Raph gave Donatello a single slow blink before launching into his semi-sarcastic reply. "Well. Guess I could go ahead and give it a shot, Don. I mean, can't really be sure or nothin', this stuff being so

freakin' NEW to me and all, right? But... I'm gonna take a stab in the dark here and say the proper word you're probably wantin' is, uh—" Raph widened his eyes to conclude solemnly, "— *breasts.* "

"Breasts!" Don agreed with cheer, pleased to have Raphael actually participating. "That works, too. Sure." He turned and wrote out 'BREASTS' beneath the word 'BOOBIES'. He stood back to survey his work for a moment before explaining somewhat shyly, "Might as well put down my personal favorite." He leaned in to add a third word to the list: TITS. This earned him a rare, appreciative snicker from both Mike and Raphael. He was looking the list over as he called out, "How about you, Leo?"

Silence.

Don shot a long-suffering look towards the ceiling before turning to face his sibling bravely. "Leo?" he repeated, hoping it would sound firm.

"Don, this is stupid," Leonardo denounced flatly, pinning him with that very even stare again.

Don seemed to honestly think about it before wondering, "How so?"

Leo continued to stare. Dammit.

Donatello swallowed. "What? It's an honest question, and completely relevant!" he reasoned quickly.

"Breasts, then," Leo growled.

"Whoa, hold up Leo," Mike called out. "Maybe you didn't notice, but – see, we already *have* that word! Don wrote it out and everything. Right up there on the board." He was more than happy to point it out, stabbing a stubby finger towards the white-board. "See? Gosh, bro. You really should pay better attention!"

Donatello shot his youngest brother a look of mild astonishment. *How can you be so fearless? You can see the mood he's in. He's going to bite your head off.* He gave himself a shake, thinking that if any of them could, Mike would be the one to get away with it.

Sure enough, Leo merely cast him a glare and muttered, "Cute."

Still he kept instigating! Mike went on to chide, "There's all KINDS of words we haven't picked yet! You could go with hooters, knockers, gazungas... You could call it her rack! Her bust! Her ta-tas! Her humps!"

Why are you doing this? Donatello was truly baffled.

"That's *enough* , Mike!"

"It's not enough until you pick one! Now, come on. There's melons! Coconuts! The twins! Headlights! Brown nosed sweater puppies! Uh… Love pillows!"

He's drawing Leo's attention on purpose. Donatello stared at his youngest brother, a faint and grateful smile now curling up the corners of his mouth. *He's doing it for me.*

"Michelangelo, I'm warning you," Leo's voice had gone deadly.

"You forgot 'jugs'," Raphael decided to pitch in. "Or—"

Leonardo turned on his red-masked brother, booming, "YOU'VE DONE ENOUGH, NOW STAY OUT OF THIS!"

"WHAT THE HELL DID I DO?" Raphael roared back.

"YOU TOOK MY NAME FOR THEM!"

For another beat or two, Leo and Raph glared at one another.

Then they both cracked up.

Almost immediately, Leo was trying to get it together again. He was failing, mostly because he kept looking at Raph. Don analyzed his brothers, torn between his amusement and his desire to get the class back on track.

Finally Leo waved his hand in the air and gasped, without waiting to be called on, "Don. Don, I - uh. Happy funbags!"

"Beg your pardon?"

"Happy... happy funbags." Another few seconds and Leonardo had his straight face perfected. He nodded at Don. "Okay?"

"That's your answer," Don confirmed dryly.

"Yes," Leonardo assured him. "Now please write it down."

Raph was just rolling at this point. He was practically in a fetal position on the couch, howling with laughter to hear these words coming from Leo's lips.

Leo shot him a look that said STOP IT. YOU ARE SCREWING ME UP. His desire to smile was showing at the corners of his mouth as he looked back at Don innocently.

"You call them happy funbags," Don persisted in monotone, folding his arms.

"That's..." Leo's face was very tight now with his effort to articulate this without laughing. "Yeah. That's - what I call 'em."

"Oh god," Raph pleaded, gripping his bridge helplessly, "Just - ow. Need to stop..."

"Out loud, or just in your head?" Don queried.

"Yes…!" Leo gasped, his words little more than an airless wheeze. His shoulders were shaking. "I mean, both! All the time!"

They both lost it again. Mikey too. Before he'd been chewing on his fist trying to hold it back for Donnie's sake.

"Dude, I'm sorry!" he giggled.

Donatello shot him a smile to let him know it was okay. He gave the whole scenario a patient headshake. Then he turned to write out 'HAPPY FUNBAGS' on the white-board slowly, giving his class ample time to compose themselves.

"All right!" he announced, when the noise was no longer such an uproar. "Since we seem to be focusing on her breasts…"

"I wasn't focused on her breasts," Leonardo felt the need to clarify. "I was focused on her silicone."

Don ignored this. "So, I'd like to pose you a very interesting question. At least, I find it interesting. But… why do we even *like* breasts?"

Michelangelo looked baffled by this question only for a moment before blurting, "Uh. Cause we're not gay?"

"I don't know if it's that simple, Mikey," Donatello grinned. "We certainly weren't breast fed when we were little. And that IS the commonly accepted reason as to why human men of this culture have such an obsession with them. I mean… if there were such thing as a female mutant turtle, do you think SHE would have breasts…?"

"No," Leonardo spoke up unexpectedly. Don was encouraged by his expression; he looked almost impressed. Even Raphael looked like he was paying attention openly now. "We're reptiles," Leo went on. "And that's a mammal thing. Of course any female of our species wouldn't have them. I guess… I'm kind of surprised, I just never thought about it before."

"Why thank you, Leo," Don smiled. "So, why do we like them?"

Leonardo met his gaze boldly and announced, "I'll be honest. They do nothing for me."

Raphael made a relieved sound. Everyone looked at him. "What?" He looked annoyed and embarrassed, mumbling, "Yeah, okay. Me neither."

Leonardo cocked a half-grin at him. "Really?"

"Yeah." Raph tried to shrug it off, looking down at the ground. "Least I'm not the only one."

"Wait a minute." Now it was Michelangelo's turn to look dismayed. "Are… are you guys saying I'm gay for liking breasts?"

Donatello laughed. "That doesn't even make sense, Mikey! No, listen. It just means you're more conditioned by society! After being exposed to so much human media geared towards the assumption that men DO like them, you just… I don't know. Picked it up, I guess. Anyway, that's the best explanation I can come up with." He came over and patted Mike's shoulder reassuringly. "And I'll tell you a secret, Mikey. I like 'em too."

"Really?" Mike beamed. He seemed rather glad not to be the sole appreciator of breasts in the family.

Donatello gave a slow pimp nod to assure him, " *Oh* yeah."

They shared a laugh over this, until Leonardo interceded impatiently, "All right, Don? I think we're plenty comfortable now. Do you think we can move on?"

"Sounds good to me, Leo," Don agreed. "Up next: stages of intimacy!"

Jesus fucking Christ.

Raphael looked at the chart now being projected onto the board. Okay, it went like this:

Kissing

Making Out / Heavy Petting

Mutual Masturbation, a.k.a. Fingering / Hand jobs

Cunnilingus / Fellatio

Intercourse

He read it again.

Again, the same thought came to him: *Jesus fucking Christ!*

Cunnilingus slash Fellatio? Raphael did not know what that shit even fucking *meant* . All he knew was that it fell somewhere between getting a hand job and getting laid.

Christ. There was all KINDS of things he could think of that would go between those!

Fuck.

He looked at Leo. Leo looked composed, the bastard.

He looked at Mikey. Mike looked eager. The little shit was grinning.

Fuck!

"All right, class."

Fuck you, Don. We ain't your class. Raphael sighed and slumped back against the couch cushions. This was such bullshit.

"Now I didn't want to patronize you, since we're already starting out pretty basic. But before this would have been just talking with a girl,

maybe holding hands..."

But see… Raphael wasn't even *there* yet. And he was so careful to make it seem just the opposite to his brothers, but now… but *this!*

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Raph knew that he was seriously screwed.

Kissing

Author's Note: Thank you Greenwillow for the help as beta reader. Thanks are also owed to Ivychan (Serendipity1 here on FFNet) and to Tori Angeli for the inspiration. They both have fantastic takes on Mikey, and I highly recommend their work!

Speaking of Work... ugh, my job has me on manditory 10 hour days right now til the end of the year with talk of moving to 12 hour days. Even on 10s it leaves me kind of exhausted at the end of the workday and slows down my writing process considerably. So please be kind gentle readers, and believe me that I have not given up on either of my two multichapter stories. I am, however, considering focusing on one or the other at this point rather than switching back and forth like I have been because dividing my focus may also be slowing me down, as well as driving me a wee bit insane. Uh, even more insane than I am naturally anyway. XD

Oh, by the way - there's references to Influence events in this chapter. It's not really required reading, but you'll understand more of what's going on in the flashback if you've read the most recent Influence chapter.

Thanks for reading!

Winnychan

Chapter 9: Kissing

Everyone seemed a little freaked out by Don's list, but Michelangelo wasn't sure why. These were all topics *he* sure was interested in! He sat forward on the arm rest and listened eagerly as Don went on.

"So... who haven't I picked on recently?" His eyes scanned the room and fell upon their oldest brother. "Leo!"

Leonardo managed only to look startled for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed, because of course he *had* been picked on recently. "Yeah?"

"What is your opinion on kissing?" Don asked him. In spite of the straight face, it still looked a bit to Michelangelo like he might be trying to make Leo squirm on purpose now.

Leo put on his game face and rose to the challenge. "First, I had better see none of it during training," he turned to inform them all gravely. "Or during a mission. You know, preferably not in my general vicinity at all, if you can help it." He broke into a cocky grin and looked back at Donatello evenly. "Especially if I'm trying to eat."

It was starting to feel like a sparring match. Don shot him an annoyed look at the successful parry, and thrust at him again with, "How about your opinion on kissing *in general?* " Mike's gaze pinged back to Leo to observe his next move.

"My opinion," Leo blinked, a picture of innocence. "Then, I guess I'd have to say I'm..." he paused to gesture vaguely before announcing, "…for it?" He pretended to think about it again and nodded to himself. "Sure. I'm gonna have to go with *for* kissing." He folded his arms around his legs to conclude archly, "You know. *Generally speaking* ."

For a moment the tension between them was palpable. Then Don looked away. "Interesting." *Score one for Leo,* Mike thought. Don's gaze settled on Raphael next and gave him a thin smile. "And how about you, Raph?" Raph had been trying to look disinterested this whole time, but started to snicker into his knuckles when Don addressed him. Don tapped his foot, clearly waiting for his answer. When Raph stopped sniggering but still didn't volunteer one, he lowered his chin and prompted with ice in his voice, " *Raph.* Please just… humor me."

"Right! Uh..." Raphael swallowed his laughter quickly and lifted one fist in the air. "AGAINST!" he bellowed with feigned righteousness.

Leo looked over at Raph to give him a sardonic smile. "You just jump at any reason to argue with me, don't you? Any reason at all."

"Nah, what can I say?" He tucked one of his hands behind his head and leaned back, looking smug. "I'm more of a 'smack 'em around and drag 'em back to my cave by the hair' sorta guy."

Everyone started to snicker at this - except for Don, who folded his arms. When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly cold. "You know, Raph – it really wouldn't surprise me."

Quick as that, Raph's temper flared. Everyone in the room could feel his mood radically shift as he snapped forward, and there was a fairly tense moment where he seemed to struggle against his own urge to rise and repay the insult physically. Eventually he settled on fixing his sibling with a black and deadly glare. "It was a fucking joke, Don," he spat.

Even Michelangelo had to admit that Don was being kind of harsh. Now he had no idea why this comment stung Raph so badly, but one thing was certain; now he could feel the stirrings of a real fight brewing. If Don continued down this track, oblivious to just how badly he'd offended Raph…

There was only one thing to do.

Mike shot his hand into the air, eyes popping wide and making urgent 'teacher, please call on me' faces.

Everyone was distracted by this, exactly according to his plan. Even Raphael and Don tore their glares off of one another and turned questioning looks towards Mike.

Don sighed, as if calling on Mike meant interrupting something *constructive* , and not just a potentially brutal ass-kicking. "Yes,

Mike?"

"Is it my turn, now?" Mike wanted to know.

Don blinked, clearly not quite following him. "Sorry?"

"Don't you want my opinion on kissing too?" Mike was starting to sound offended. *Sheesh, I get NO credit at all from you guys…* They all thought he was such a kid!

"Oh!" Don caught up with him at last and nodded quickly. "Right, of course. Uh, sorry." He seemed angry and embarrassed for having let Raph completely derail him yet again. But like always, he was quick to reason those feelings away and focus his attention on Michelangelo without bias. "Please go ahead, Mikey."

"Well, to be honest? I'm gonna have to side with Raph on this one and say 'against'. Or of course there's always the chance I'm just such a total n00b that I have no clue how to do it. But – yeah. If that's it, then kissing's like… serious awkward times, dudes. I'm tellin' you. Our mouths are kinda BIG for it, you know? I mean, it's like that whole glasses and braces thing, only instead of the glasses and braces, there's my mouth, right?"

This got everyone's attention. The other three turtles were all staring at Michelangelo now.

"Mikey," Don asked, surprised but starting to smile at him. "Have you – actually *kissed* a girl?"

"Um." It had occurred to Mike by now that Don was the ONLY one smiling. The other two? SO not smiling. Crap. "Heh, uh, who me? Why... why would you ask me such a thing?" He was shrinking where he sat, trying to ignore the interrogation lamp intensity that was Leo's best You Had Better Be Joking stare.

All of them were still giving him expectant looks. Raph's really wasn't so bad, just kind of frozen and mistrusting. Typical, really. Donnie...

he was still making faces like Mike had lost his first tooth, or brought back an A on his report card or something. When he caught Mike's gaze again, Don gave him an encouraging nod. "It's okay, Mike!" Leo shot him a look for saying this, but Don completely missed it.

Well, maybe it *would* be okay? Don was in charge right now! Don wouldn't let Leo murderize him, right? Not when they'd been working so hard to be pals again... This might just be the perfect time to confess!

All of them were giving him expectant looks. Mike's mind raced back quickly over the events that had transpired that night. And of course he'd been DYING to tell someone, but he couldn't exactly regale them with what had *really* happened…

" *Ever had a shotgun, Mikey?"*

The thing about Gelly is, she's hot. Like, so smokin' hot she's automatically in the Girls Who Are Way Outta My League category. On top of that, she's also off limits in a serious way. She has a boyfriend. A boyfriend who happens to be a friend of mine. A boyfriend who happens to own multiple guns.

So… yeah. Off limits. BELIEVE ME, I know this.

Problem is, she's so hot that I still manage to forget all the time and wind up staring at her like a chode. I mean, without even realizing it!

" *Huh?" And I was starting to think maybe THIS was one of those times. So embarrassing… Down, hormones. Down!*

" *A shotgun," she repeated, squinting her eyes and bending forward, laughing at me. "Have you had one or not?"*

" *Not, uh… registered in my name or anything." I blinked at her. I was trying to figure out at what point I lost track of our conversation; even after wracking my brain over it for a moment, I remained*

clueless as to how we'd even come upon this weird topic. "I mean, I have disarmed a few people who were holding shotguns," I went on to inform her conversationally, deciding that inane chatter had to be better than a potentially awkward stretch of silence. "But I guess it never really occurred to me to hang on to any of 'em. Mostly because I'm not into hunting. Like, as a sport. Also I've never been a redneck with sexually active daughters. So… y'know, not much need really. Mostly I get by with the 'chucks."

Maybe it was just that I was really stoned by that point. I'll be the first to admit, I could be remembering it all wrong. Looking back, it was definitely not the smoothest thing I've ever said, right? But I swear to you, dude – she seemed to eat it up!

" *Oka-ay," she giggled, "Clearly not, then! But geez, you're completely adorable, you know that?" She suddenly beamed and patted the couch cushion beside her, beckoning me with one finger. "C'mere! Sit by me, kay?"*

I was utterly lost by this point, but more than happy to obey.

She had some kind of glitter on her eyelashes, like actual craft store glitter, and the low light was making them sparkle like crazy. Gelica didn't like to use traditional things for make-up if she could help it. I'd watched her smudge pastel sticks over her eyelids before, insisting it was fine because the box said non-toxic. One night she used my Prismacolor markers to put three little stars on her cheek. All her threads came from thrift stores mostly, but she still managed to pull off outfits that made her look like some kinda grungy punk rock princess next to the rest of our rag-tag crew.

There was a glass piece on the coffee table in front of her. She plucked it up now, peering into the bowl and poking one blue-polished fingernail down past the charred layer of ash and soot, checking to see if there was even anything worth smoking underneath it. Apparently there was. She got out a bic lighter and lit the bowl, pulling a hit into her lungs while I waited patiently.

You know, I'm not gonna lie. I did have some warning. I'm pretty sure she did actually say to me, just as she was leaning in, "Breathe in, okay?" In my defense, she was still trying to hold that hit of pot smoke in her lungs, so her voice was all airless and kind of a scratchy croak at the time. But I heard her.

I just didn't quite register , you know? I kinda thought, for some retarded reason, that she had leaned in to kiss me.

I mean, her mouth was on mine all of a sudden. And she's such a beautiful girl. This sort of thing just does not happen to me. But I really thought it was, for a second. Heh. Call me an optimist...

I went into Total Panic Mode, of course. Complete and total freak out.

HolycrapholycrapHOLYCRAP, DUDE! What am I supposed to do now? God, her mouth was so TINY. Would my tongue even fit in there? It was tiny and it was warm ! I could tell, then, her blood temperature was way higher than mine. No seriously, I'm in the middle of what might be my first kiss and I'm having these kind of horrible Don thoughts about blood temperature, no joke! It was horrifying…

So, what's up with tongues? Where do they go? The movies don't prepare me for this moment like I assumed they would. Even the stuff they might have showed me, like where to stick my hands, I can't seem to recall a thing. On the back of her head? Oh yeah, I remember that I'm supposed to have one on the back of her neck. I'm pretty sure anyway, and so I start to, in a totally late and non-smooth fashion. I so don't make it there in time before she's pulled away. Crap. Just… crap!

I didn't even need the dumbstruck look on her face to know that I'd completely blown it.

" *Uh, what was that?" she said, staring at me.*

I stared back helplessly. "The worst kiss ever? Look, I'm really sorry. It was, though – don't even try to deny it. On a scale of one to ten—"

" *You thought it was a kiss?" She was laughing at me now. I looked away, wanting to disappear. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry Mikey, it's just… no! Haha, it's just a shotgun. You know! A pothead trick… Like, even though it's already been in my lungs you can get high off it, like, um. Two people can get high off the same hit!"*

" *Wow," I agreed flatly. "Yeah, that's so clever."*

She saw that I was withdrawing maybe. She was looking into my eyes now, and really starting to sound sorry. "I didn't mean anything by it, Mikey. I was just playing around. I wasn't tryin' to tease you…"

At this point I was really just wracking my brain for some way to laugh it off with her. This is one of the reasons Gelly and I get along so well, normally. We'd both rather laugh than cry about shit.

" *It's just, it would have been my first. If it – had been –"*

Yeah. This is me failing.

" *Aw, Mikey…"*

Failing at the worst possible time.

She's brushing tears off my face now, looking horrified.

" *What I mean is. I just. I wasn't prepared. I—"*

I'm gonna blame the weed. I mean, besides myself. I still totally blame myself here, don't get me wrong. But geez. How pathetic is THIS?

Her fingers stroke my cheek in silence, quickly calming me. Then she goes into this speech. And I don't know how much of it I should believe. Apparently I'm nice and sweet and really smart and super creative to the extreme, and she completely worships me, but we

have to be friends because she's a human, and, well, of course she has a boyfriend she loves very much.

Yeah, it was all in one breath like that. I just stare at her. "Of course," I tell her. "I know, of course you do."

For some reason I can't stop hearing the 'because I'm a human' part. That's the part that crushes the hope inside me.

" *I think you should count it, Mikey," she tells me solemnly, after she's hugged me, as we're saying goodbye that night. It's hours later, but right away I know what she means.*

I didn't answer her, and we haven't talked about it since. But I do count it.

How could I tell them any of what really happened?

"…And so of course I wish I could have her as my own, but it's like a fated star-crossed romance, and we are never to be! We must be separated by streams of stars in the milky way and all of you should be sad that you will never have a love like ours! It is tragic and I will weep over it! WEEP!"

Mike was on a roll and couldn't seem to stop himself.

"It's okay though, because I've gotten over her. Really, even though she was my very first boyish crush, I am over my childish days of yore and I am moving on... to Jenna Jameson. I think we stand a chance. I think she will fall for my charm and wit and my rippling muscles, and we will have a house together in Biloxi."

"Biloxi, huh?" Don murmured, amused.

"That's right, Biloxi."

Leonardo was looking at Mike with obvious disappointment. "You aren't going to tell us how it really went at all, are you?" he guessed, crossing his arms.

But by now Mike had prepared the ultimate defense. "Well, normally I would Leo. It's just, I was taught that a girl doesn't like it when a guy blabs about all the stuff he got to do with her." Cue smile to Donatello, who broke into a huge grin.

Then Don tried to smother it and get everyone back on track, mustering his Voice of Authority, "That's right, so leave him alone about it. But Mike did manage to bring up some very good points about the basics of kissing, even with his rather elaborate tale. We'll get to those in just a moment…" He winked at Mike, then launched into all the most boring and awkward things you might ever want to know about kissing. "Now, kissing isn't just a human thing. There are other non-human primates that display this behavior, but no reptiles that I know of, so it's not really that strange that it doesn't feel natural to us. If we were to look at it from a strictly reptile standpoint, a more natural gesture of affection for us might be to stroke the cheek or neck with our nails…"

That struck Mike as a little strange. He looked over at Raph and Leo. They were both suddenly behaving. Mike suspected they were just grateful that Don was back in lecture mode and no longer calling for audience participation.

"Anthropologists aren't in agreement as to whether or not kissing is a learned or instinctive behavior. Some say it might be related to mothers premasticating food for their children, or maybe even some offshoot of grooming behavior…"

Michelangelo tried to pay attention. But probably as much due to the subject matter as any fault of Don's, his mind regularly drifted back to that beat up couch, to the glitter winking off her sooty mascara, and to the smell of pot smoke and her patchouli filling the air around him.

Chaos Descends

Author's Note: Many thanks to Greenwillow for the beta read, and to all my readers for putting up with how long I kept you all waiting... I hope it was worth it! As you can probably see, this chapter is kinda HUGE. Hang onto your seats because it's time for everything to go to hell!

XOXO

Winnychan

Leonardo had given up trying to care about anything else Don might have to say to them about kissing. Staring down at his kneepads, a part of him recognized that his thoughts had run sullen and self-pitying. Still he allowed himself a brief fit of angst with the vague notion that he might privately purge some of his bitterness.

Right now he was wishing for something within the code of Bushido that he could use to endorse a life of celibacy. On the tails of that thought, the heavy irony that maybe he should have been more open to the Ancient One's attempts to convert him to Buddhism. At least then he would have an excuse.

Leo's gaze broke upwards to study each of his brother's faces in turn, then plunged back into his lap with a brief scowl. He was the first son. The first to be released from the academic lessons they had endured throughout boyhood (though Don would have surpassed him easily, if he hadn't been such a procrastinator for any assignments that didn't interest or challenge him). First to master almost every single *kata* . First to be handed a *bokken* . First to be given real weapons, blunted – then first granted permission to sharpen them. First to need training beyond what Master Splinter could teach them. First to undergo his trials. He knew that it was only

a matter of time before he was the first of them to achieve the rank of *chunin* .

He'd been the first to draw blood. First to deal death. He was first in line to lead them all, goddamn it! And yet somehow, Leonardo – first son of the Hamato clan – knew with a sinking feeling, a vast and awful certainty…

He was going to be the last one to get laid.

Dead last. *Can my life get any more humiliating?* Peeking back up at the list, these so-called 'stages of intimacy' Don still intended to cover, he had to check himself to keep from groaning. *Why, yes… actually it could.*

A more mature voice in his head spoke up then to chide him. *So, is this pity party over yet?*

Screw this whiny self-indulgence. It was pointless, and not helping him in the slightest. Instead he would wipe his mind and emotions blank with the methods taught to him by his masters. Pulling his spirit free of his body, he envisioned his angry, immature emotions as an oil painting sitting on a wooden easel before him.

The painting itself was done in dark, violent colors, thrown together with messy, artless haste. *(—more detail, my son! You must not neglect details.)* Freshly painted, it was smeared and dripping in places, the slick contours reflecting wetly in the low light. *(Show me the way light reflects on its surfaces, my son. Show me the shadow that falls behind it.)* He looked towards the source of the light, and there now stood a single candle propped upright in a glass jar. Grey rivulets of wax ran down and over the lip of the jar on one side. *(—simple enough just to envision a thing. A true master also knows the texture, the weight of what his mind creates. In this way you can draw power and stability into all you would shape in the realm of spirit…)*

There was another object gleaming on the small, battered table: a silver painter's knife. The original had been a forgotten antique, taken with permission from April's shop before the Foot Clan had burned it to the ground. He reached for it and was immediately dissatisfied with his efforts. Instead of his father's patient guidance, he now heard the harsh criticism of his sensei across the sea. *(Looka dis, fall all apaht like ashes. Poof! No moh! …Pah. You gimme betta. Dissa' vision so bad, he can't get to nobody else'ah mind. He nebba' gon' suhbibe da trip!)* The handle was made of polished shell. It had probably been lovely once, but its prismatic shimmer had given way to discolored swirls of yellow and brown. It was polished smooth and silken to the touch from years of loving use… *(No moh dis garbage, Kumquat! You master dis lesson or you can nebba get any betta…)* Suddenly he recalled that the shell had cracked on one side. When he turned the knife over, there it was…. He bounced the knife gently in his palm, then ran his thumb over the small ravine, caked black inside from the buildup of paint and dirt that had collected there over the years… *(Yes. Solid… and even more beautiful than I remember. Well done.)*

Holding the knife out before him, he placed its edge on the canvas and brought it down with all the slow reverence of a sacred ritual. He watched the paint scrape away like it had never been, leaving only clean white canvas in its wake…

It's not like this is some kind of achievement. It's not a trial to be passed. It's personal…

A mess of black and green oil was growing on the side of the blade now, and he lifted it off the painting and studied it for a moment.

Some healthy competition between us can be a good thing, but it will hurt our team in the long run if I insist on making a contest out of everything.

He lifted the hand not holding the knife, holding it palm-up. "Palette," he whispered, and felt it drop onto his hand. Leo knew it was there, knew that it was perfect, even without looking. The whorls in the

stained wood, the texture – rougher on the underside, whereas the top was oiled soft and smooth. He'd held it, and had dreamt himself holding it, often enough before.

Leonardo wiped the knife clean against the edge of the palette before setting the silver tool down on the canvas again. Dark purples and bruise-colored greens peeled away under the efforts of his knife. *Not like any of them would really think less of me… At least, they wouldn't say so to my face. Wouldn't dare…*

Scrape and wipe and scrape again. Red and black congealed in bloody swirls before the sweep of his blade. *Do I really think it's anything to boast about, being the first to kill a man? Is it really such a good thing, to have become so acclimated to dealing death that I would take pride – sometimes even pleasure – in the same deeds that used to make me sick with remorse and shame?*

It was still a disaster, but he continued to work stubbornly. He would scrape his soul clean of this mess.

Meanwhile, Raphael was getting pretty fed up. This stupid Talk was quite possibly the most awkward and annoying thing he had ever had to sit through in his entire LIFE. *And Leo, who is supposed to have my back, is in some kinda deep communion with his kneepads. Great… just great.*

When he couldn't take it any more, he drew back his elbow and thumped it against Leo's bridge as hard as he felt he could get away with without drawing Donatello's wrath. Leonardo startled and looked over to give him a black look. Raph returned it stubbornly for a moment. Then he faced pointedly forward and hissed out of the side of his mouth, "Don's looked over at you a couple times, now. He's gonna pitch a bitch in a second here if you don't cut it out."

"Sorry," Leo mumbled, dropping his eyes and scowling down at his hands.

"Yeah, well, you should be," Raph grumped. "You ARE working on a plan, yeah? Not just, like… skippin' around in la-la-land while the rest of us sit here and suffer, *right?* "

"By the rest of us, I assume you just mean yourself," Leo pointed out, neatly dodging the question. He'd always been good at coming up out of his happy place and quickly reorienting himself, and now he tipped a nod towards where Don had found an eager participant in Mikey.

"Yeah, pretty much," Raph agreed sullenly, ducking his chin close to his plastron and folding his arms.

Now they were going over – mouth positioning? Mike was trying to emulate a crudely drawn diagram and Don was calling out amused corrections. "Geez, Mike! The idea is *not* to swallow half her face."

After watching them for a moment, Leonardo squicked and made a face before carefully schooling his expression neutral again. Watching this reaction from his older brother, Raphael felt somewhat mollified. *Okay,* he thought, *at least he's still with me on this.*

"Actually, I'm fine with it if they wanna perv out together," he said in a low mutter, "so long as they leave me the hell alone. I swear, Leo… If he says he wants us to, like -- I dunno, practice kissing on dummy heads or something? I'm gonna flip the fuck out."

"If it comes to that," Leo said, nodding once, "I'll flip out with you."

"Look, you two," Don raised his voice suddenly, giving the pair still on the couch a bruised look. "If you wanna tune me out, that's fine I guess. But can you please not whisper amongst each other? I'm not deaf, and it's just really disrespectful and rude of you."

Raphael shot a glance towards Leo, mildly concerned by Don's cunning word choice. Those were definitely two of Leo's personal favorite reasons to bitch, and he was afraid they might have some

weight with Leo when thrown back at him. But the blue-banded turtle merely met Don's accusations with a blank stare.

He waited another few seconds, but it was clear Leo was doing his non-reaction shtick. Raph decided he didn't have the patience for this any longer. "Leo, haven't we heard enough? Can we please just agree that this sucks and stop now?"

"No, we may not!" Don protested, gaping at him.

Raph stood up, balling his fists, "Well, I'm sorry Don, but we're maybe gonna have to veto you here. Because it does. It sucks, and it's just gonna' keep on sucking 'til we step up and put a stop to it!"

"We are not 'putting a stop' to anything because we don't have permission to stop yet," Don reminded him, eyes flashing with anger.

Leo's gaze was hovering between his arguing brothers now, failing to acknowledge either of their glances begging his support. "Well, I wasn't really *askin'* for your permission, Don! I'm putting a stop to it *now.* With force, if necessary!"

"I wasn't talking about MY permission, Raph," Don corrected bitterly, narrowing his gaze. "I was talking about Splinter's!"

"Now, wait. Nobody's using brute force to solve this," Leo finally asserted, getting up to his feet as well.

It was not what Raph wanted to hear. "Oh, so now you're suddenly on his side?" He was stung, and blustering to cover it. "FINE! I'm still not putting up with it! Not anymore. I'm done! And you're done too, if you know what's good for ya Don!"

"Dudes, shouting at each other isn't gonna make this go any faster," Mike reminded them all with a groan.

"It's not that I'm on his side, Raph—" Leo began, but was cut off promptly by Donatello.

"And why the hell IS that, I wonder? You know, I pretty much expected this sort of anti-authority attitude from him. But can you please tell me what I did to deserve it from you, Leo?"

Leo seemed to consider answering this, then blew Don off and turned to address Raphael instead. "Listen. It's not that I'm on his side. I'm pretty sure I want to put a stop to this three-ring circus as badly as you do…"

"HELLO?" Don cried, spreading his arms in disbelief. "Still in the room, here!"

Leo shot Don a warning look. "Oh, we can leave if you like." Then it was back to Raph. "The thing is, I still refuse to solve this by beating him up or verbally abusing him."

Raph actually looked down at his feet for a moment to consider this. "Well… that IS kinda how we solve most of OUR problems," he reasoned when he glanced up again, briefly smug.

Leo matched his wry grin. "Yes, well. If you haven't noticed, that doesn't work on Don. You two are about as different as night and day."

"Thank the ancestors for that," Don muttered under his breath.

"Enough!" Leonardo whirled on Don reproachfully. "I said no more insults!"

"Well, spit it out if you've got a better idea," Raph prompted, folding his arms. "What do we do instead, Leo?"

"We do what you suggested in the first place," Leo decided. "We go to Master Splinter and tell *him* how we feel about this class."

"No. Fuck that! Changed my mind. What's the point?" Raph scowled. "You know it's not gonna make a damn bit'a difference. Or… actually? Maybe you don't! Coz normally you're the one in HIS

position! So lemme just spell it out for you, 'cause this is how it's gonna go. Splinter's put DON in charge of this thing." Raph stabbed a finger at Donatello. "And if we all go in there cryin' to sensei about how much we don't wanna do this, HE'S the only one who's gonna have Master Splinter's ear. *Trust me.* And like… welcome to my world!"

"Leo, that's *ridiculous* ," Don began. "Splinter would never…" But he rolled his eyes in exasperation when he took in Leo's lapse into stony silence. Raph's words had struck a chord in him.

"Raph's probably right," Leonardo said at length. "I mean, there are still things I'd really like to bring up with him. But I can't help remember the last thing Master Splinter said to me when this whole thing started…" His expression darkened and he looked away bitterly, "The only order he gave me was, 'See that your brothers mind him well'. So, yeah… I'm pretty sure he's going to hold me to that."

"You can bet on it," Raphael agreed dourly.

"Alright. So since we're not going to Splinter – and we're not going to kick his shell or stand around flinging insults at one another – I'm sorry Raph, but talking it over is pretty much the only option we have left."

"Was afraid you'd say something like that," Raph sighed, pushing the heels of his palms against his eyes for a second. "Grghh… Yeah. Okay. We can try that."

"Well, then this is rather monumental, Raph!" Don said with a tight smile. "Are you also going to try to use some more descriptive adjectives than "sucks" and "stupid" for this constructive criticism of yours?"

"YOU SEE?" Raph roared, whirling on Leo. "How am I supposed to talk to him when he's like that?"

"Don! He agreed to talk instead of fight about it, and you're STILL being petty and demeaning. Cut it out. Raph... It's your turn. Talk. Please."

"Er… sure. So this Talk of yours… it's kind of. We hate it."

"Okay," Don encouraged, circling an upturned palm vaguely. "Adjective time."

Mike had been mostly quiet throughout this bickering, but now groaned a warning, "Don…"

"Look, believe me when I say I'm thrilled to hear that he's agreed to try some non-violent methods of problem solving for once in his life! But if he doesn't say anything that I can actually use to better my efforts, then what's the point of even talking?"

"This time he's got some constructive points, Don!" Leo defended. He shot Raph a quick, questioning look. *At least, I hope he does.*

"We'll see about that. You're just ganging up on me, as far as I can tell. Say all the negative things you want about the lesson I've put together, or me personally as a teacher, but don't tell me I'm wasting everyone's time. Because this fact remains: I am NOT the primary cause for why this is taking so long. And if there's something else, I'd really like to hear it. Because I've STILL failed to pin down exactly what it is about the lesson that has everyone's tails in a knot."

"Uh, for the record… MY tail? One-hundred percent straight, dudes."

"Yeah, I think we've established that, Mikey," Don giggled, glad for the break in tension. The tense set of his shoulders had relaxed slightly. Mike's joke had reminded him that not *everyone* was against him.

"Quiet, Mike!" Raphael snapped impatiently. "And Don, I'm 'bout to TELL you, if you'd shut up for two seconds and listen to me! Now…

this Talk of yours, it's obvious you don't even KNOW us well enough to try and school us on this stuff."

"You know, you're absolutely right! That's why I felt I had to just try and cover everything, in the hopes that—"

"Everything?" Raph bellowed. "Take a look at that list, Don! I can tell you right now, ya ain't even coming CLOSE!"

"What ABOUT the list?" Don countered, shooting it a glance and looking honestly baffled now. "Seriously, what? Are you trying to refute the items on the list already, or is it missing steps, or what? If it's just because it *embarrasses* you…"

"NO! Now would'ja quit yapping for two seconds, Don? You been at it all morning, and Leo said it's MY turn now. So SHADDUP ALREADY and listen to what I got to say, for cryin' out loud!"

Don folded his arms and nodded grudgingly. "Go on, then. I'm listening."

Raph eyed his brainy brother as if daring him to open his mouth again. Don didn't, pressing his mouth together in a flat line and arching his brow ridges expectantly. Raph glanced back at Leo, who gave him an encouraging nod. Raph huffed once, trying to shed enough of his irritation to continue in a more reasonable tone. "Good. Now just… lemme try and get through to you. So, listen. Let's say you're this… I dunno. This super-genius freakboy with loads of engineering experience."

"Hypothetically," Donnie quipped in a smart-ass tone of voice.

"Right," Raph shot him a glare at the interruption but managed to hold on to his train of thought. "So, you're a genius and then you meet this other guy. And he's just, whatever. Dude who's spent some time in his garage. 'Nuff to think he knows his way around a box of tools, anyway. He's no Einstein, but he's thinkin' he can get the job done. And alright, so maybe he dunno how to calibrate the trans-

rotational spin on the bi-lateral routers of the what-the-fuck-ever. But if all he's tryin' to do is get peg A into socket B? Then maybe – just *maybe* , Don – you better let him try and *cram that fucker in there on his own* before you jump in with all your fancy know-how, tryin' to read him the freakin' owner's manual!

"Just… give me a moment to sort through all the macho metaphors and grasp what you're actually trying to tell me here," Don sighed, starting to rub his temples.

Raph's eyes blazed at this, and his arms parted explosively. "What, I gotta SPELL IT OUT for ya? I'm sayin' keep your grubby hands off my toolbox, Donnie! And while you're at it, back the FUCK up outta my garage!"

Mike shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then spoke up suddenly. "Uh, can I jump in for a second?"

"No. You will be quiet," Leonardo ordered.

"What?" Mike puffed up, immediately offended. "Everyone else got their turn. Even Raph! And since all the arguing started, I HAVE been quiet. Really, really quiet! In fact, I probably woulda' broke the world record of Mike Quietness except for when I had to point out how straight my tail is. But it is though, right? So I just had to say that one thing."

"No. You did not. Now I said *shut it!* "

"I was defending its honor, dude! Because it's true. It's totally exit only. No exceptions!"

"You suddenly want your turn to talk, huh?" Leo was looming dangerously over Mike now. "Yeah. I'm sure you DO have something to say. Something cute and distracting, no doubt – and what a surprise! You've come up with it right when we've all reached our boiling point!"

"Uh… Leo? I think you just lost me." Mike wasn't sure how he managed to loom so well when they were both standing up and looking one another in the eye. He wasn't THAT much taller than Mike, but it never seemed that way when his big brother was an inch away from kicking his shell. "What… exactly are you tryin' to say, bro?"

"I'm saying that *I am on to you* , Michelangelo," Leo growled, forcing the smaller turtle back a step by moving towards him, refusing to let up. "And don't you dare play dumb with me! I see EXACTLY what you've been doing, and you're not going to get away with it again! Your tap dancing on Don's behalf ends now."

Mike opened his mouth and then closed it again.

"As of right now, this class is officially on hiatus until we figure this out! Now, Raphael has made some very valid points." Leo backed off of his advance on Mike, but continued heatedly. "And nobody's shouting now, so there is no need for you to jump in like you always do and smooth everything over."

"You were kinda almost shouting," Mike observed petulantly. He flinched when this earned him a dangerous look and went on quickly, "I'm just saying! Anyway, maybe I got valid some points too."

"What? Like housing costs in Biloxi?" Raph griped, thumping him on the shoulder.

"Ow! No, dude! Like, actual ones. For real."

Don swallowed and spoke up softly, "If Mike has valid points… I would really like to hear them. So, please go ahead."

Leonardo did NOT like having his word trumped, and opened his mouth to say as much. Then he closed it, remembering that Don was in charge, and looked down at the floor bitterly.

Mike nodded. "Great. Well, first of all, you guys are kinda bein' jerks. I mean…" He tugged on the tails of his bandana and glanced away sheepishly as he continued. "I goof off in lessons and stuff, but you guys are bein' ten times as bad. There's just been nothing but serious jerkdom outta both of you all morning."

"Okay," Leo allowed evenly.

"Hey, if I have to use better adjectives, then so does he," Raph grumbled. "Cuz that 'jerkdom' one was kinda stupid."

"And it sucked, too," Leo threw in, earning a smirk from Raph.

" *Secondly* ," Mike went on, unruffled because he was quite confident in his awesome command of the English language, "Donnie obviously doesn't wanna be sayin' all this stuff any more than you dudes wanna hear it. This is not the way Don acts when he's havin' a good time. In fact, he seems to be havin' such a NOT fun time that I'm pretty sure he had no choice about it in the first place. I mean… duh. Come on."

Everyone looked at Don. He shifted his weight uncomfortably, not looking at anyone. "Of course I don't have a choice," he said softly.

"Well, even still, Don!" Raph scowled. "The way you're goin' about it really su— I mean. It's really… Uh. It's *lacking* ."

Don looked towards the ceiling. "Raph, that still means nothing. It's the exact same thing."

"DAMNIT! You know what I FUCKING MEAN!"

"Raph," Leo couldn't help a small smile now, putting a hand on his brother's shell to stop him. "Why don't I do the talking. Okay?"

"Great." He waved at Leo in frustration. "Yeah, go for it."

Leo looked back at Mike expectantly. "So, DID you have any other points to make?"

"Yeah. Uh, thirdly… um." Mike didn't, actually. His mouth worked for a moment, then he floundered, "Also, I can see what you're saying about those housing costs. You know, I didn't even think of that! I better consult Suzanne Wang and see what she has to say about it… like, ay-sap."

Raph scrunched his face in confusion. "Who the hell's Suzanne Wang?"

"Dude! Ok, aside from the whole last name thing, which is just all kinds of hysterical – for an older chick, she's the hottest! My own personal HGTV Goddess. How can you NOT know who Suzanne Wang is?"

"Because I don't watch the fucking Home and Garden channel? And I'm kinda disturbed that you do, Mike. We live in a sewer, fer chrissakes!"

"I don't even care! I'll watch her for hours, bro. She's just so perky! In like, all KINDS of awesome ways!"

"MICHELANGELO!" Leo blazed. "I have warned you repeatedly NOT to do this—!"

"Well, actually," Don piped up, shuffling forward suddenly to stand between Mike and his big brother, "his first two points *were* valid, Leo."

"Oh yeah! I'm just SUCH A JERK, Don! Maybe I just don't believe that any of us NEED to hear this stuff! How is ANY of this list appropriate to talk about in a lesson? Does Splinter know about this list? Have you actually read him the lesson plan?" He shifted his stance to include all of them, pointing an accusing finger towards Donatello as he continued hotly. "If this Talk was about safety, or doing the right thing, then FINE. I would understand. I could submit to that. But I am not about to sit here and listen to Don explain to me the intricacies of... of FINGERING GIRLS! And… and all the rest of it! I highly doubt that Master Splinter meant for this Talk to be so

graphic and OBSCENE, and I've had JUST ABOUT ENOUGH OF IT!"

Everyone was staring at Leo now. It occurred to him that he may, in fact, have been shouting just then. Trying to rein it in, he gestured sharply at Raphael and grumbled, "That's my main problem, anyway. Did you have anything else you wanted to add to that, Raph?"

"Fuckin' A," was all Raph could come up with, giving him a huge and somewhat misty-eyed grin.

"Well. All right then," Leo concluded. "There you have it, I guess."

"So… just hold on a minute. I never meant for any of it to be obscene. I – and I really don't feel that it HAS been, I mean - I never…" Don was clearly flustered now. He turned to sweep his notes up off the card table and began rifling through them anxiously.

"Plenty of what you've been saying to us has been completely inappropriate. But if you need hard evidence, well, I'm pretty confident that THIS-" Leo paused and strode forward, tearing the Jenna Jameson picture off the whiteboard. He held up Display D accusingly. "This right here? Counts as obscene, Don."

This decisive action drew an immediate cry of protest from Mike. "My BABY! Don't you dare talk about my new true love like that! Give her here, Leo! You may not approve of our love, but nothing you can say will ever stop us. Me and Jenna are going to last forever!"

Leo had been sorely tempted to crumple the display into a ball, but he knew that any satisfaction he got from this would be short-lived. Ultimately, it was more important for him to be able to claim that he had acted rationally and maturely if and when Master Splinter got involved. He held the display out stiffly. "You are welcome to her, Mike," he declared with obvious distaste. "I'm sure you'll be quite happy with one another."

"Mmm… thought we weren't resorting to insults," Don said without looking up from where he was now leaning over the card table, making some last minute changes to his outline.

"No foul there, bro. That's the God's honest truth!" Mike gave Display D one last, loving look before rolling it up carefully and using the sticky tack still attached to the corners to keep it fastened. He set it down on the floor under the armrest he had claimed throughout the lesson. Then he bounced back over to the others and announced, "So! Uh, whose turn is it to shout and be all blustery and offended now? I lost track."

"I could go another round," Raph grinned. "Hell, this 'talk shit out' thing is gettin' better by the minute."

"No! No more shouting. Please," Don sighed, straightening and tapping his papers against their edges to realign them into a neat stack. "Leo, I'm just going to restate the offer I made to you earlier. I thought we could last until the basics part was over, but – clearly your concern is more urgent than I'd realized initially, so – yeah. Let's just step outside right now and I'll go over everything I was going to cover, and we can come to some kind of agreement. Because really the last thing I want is to fight about it."

Raphael gave a snort at this, but Leo held up a hand to ward off anything he might have to say about that sentiment. "Agreed."

"Aww, he's just going to take out all the good parts," Mike complained, directing his appeal at Raph.

Raph shot Mike a look, clearly unmoved by this reasoning, and then looked at Leo. "It's gonna get shorter, right?"

"Most definitely," Leo assured him. Things were going his way now, and he was starting to look pleased.

"Then go for it. Still don't know why he's gotta leave the room to figure this crap out," he added grumpily. "But – you've got it covered,

so – y'know. Whatever."

"It's so no one else has to see it, if they wind up flippin' out on each other," Mike guessed, falling back onto the couch with a flop and slumping down into the cushions.

"Nobody's flipping out on *anyone* ," Don asserted in a short voice. "We're just stepping outside for a moment to work this out like the intelligent, rational beings that we are. *Right* , Leo?" With that, he tucked his papers under one arm and stalked out of the room.

"Uh, right," Leo agreed, missing a beat. But on the next he had recovered and was moving to follow Don with his usual confident stride.

"Just don't take TOO long, yeah?" Raph called after his departing brothers. "If I have to come out and getcha 'cause yer taking forever, m'gonna be pissed."

When he got no reply, Raph sighed and shook his head, thoroughly frustrated. He moved back to the couch and flopped down beside Mike. "This blows."

"You're telling me," Mike agreed, folding his arms and pulling his face into a sulk. "And not just the taking forever part. I mean… what the hell is wrong with you, bro? How could'ja let Leo get away with all that? He's just gonna take out all the good parts until it's one big crummy lecture. The whole thing's going to totally suck now!"

"You kiddin' me? It already DID suck. And it WILL suck, even after Leo gets done with it. It HAS to. It's like, doomed to suck, okay? And there ain't nothin' we can do about it. Least this way we won't hafta' sit here for so long."

"I repeat… what is WRONG with you?" Mike spread his hands, looking at Raph urgently. "How can you say it's gonna suck LESS because Leo's gonna have his way with it? I mean, hel-lo? Last time I checked, Leo's kinda long-winded himself! Gah. Please grow some

balls, Donnie! PLEASE! Don't let Leo make the whole thing be completely, ginormously BORING!"

"Shove it, Mike! At least it won't gross me out so much after Leo's done guttin' it."

"What was so gross about it? You were seriously grossed?" Mike looked over like he found this very interesting.

Raph widened his eyes, then began to growl and splutter defensively. "What? No! It's just – all I'm sayin' is, when it's comin' from DONNIE—!"

"Who cares if it's coming from Donnie? Dude, that makes it ten times funnier! Cause' he's so… y'know, he's DONNIE! He almost NEVER joins in when I'm droolin' over girls, an' start sayin' stuff… Cept' maybe to chew me out for not bein' respectful to women, if I got carried away! Anyway, Don's like… I dunno. Raph. Sorry, but it seems extra stupid to be embarrassed when it's him we're talkin' about. I mean, yeah -- he'll get on your case for using sucky adjectives, or not makin' any sense, or like – maybe he'll harp on you to help out around the house and stuff. But when it's this sort of thing? Like, questions about girls or puberty, or – well, pretty much any of the really awkward stuff in life? He'd be the last one to laugh. Seriously! He just doesn't think that way. He's immune. He's the guy who, like, doesn't even bat an eye about havin' to change bed pans if one of us gets seriously hurt. Or he'll give us sponge baths, or whatever we need!"

"Ugh," Raph mumbled, shaking his head. "Can we just… maybe not talk about any 'a *that* stuff, either?" He was the only one who had ever wound up so hurt as to need any of that, and they both knew it.

"But he does, dude! He'll do any nasty thing we need him to do for us. And then afterwards, when we're all better, he won't say one word about it! No matter how embarrassing the thing was. It's like he doesn't even think to! Seriously, there was this one time, and he

didn't even tease me one single bit, even after I needed his help 'cause I'd accidentally got my – uh, you know -- stuck in this…"

"MIKE!" Raph had his hands cupped on either side of his face now. "Just… just stop! I get it, okay? Just, never mind! Jesus! I mean, what was I thinkin'? Of course nothin' would ever gross YOU out. You been too much of a weirdo from day one."

Mike was not phased by this quick assessment of his weirdness. The truth was, he was not phased by most of the things his brothers could think of to say about him. Raphael felt this was one of his most infuriating traits – but at the same time, he was wise enough to be glad for it. Anybody who wanted to be Raph's friend and stay that way had better develop thick skin and a resilient disposition. Mike had always been good for that.

But this was one of the times it was just an annoyance. Even now, Mike was peering at Raph with a new level of scrutiny that was making the larger turtle start to feel very uncomfortable. "What are you LOOKING AT?" he finally growled, unable to ignore him any longer.

"Are you *hiding* something?" Mike wondered. "Is that what this is about?"

When Raph didn't answer except to grunt with annoyance, Michelangelo began to smile. It was a very diabolical, close-lipped smile, and as he watched it continued to unfurl slowly, wrapping up the sides of his green freckled face and going all curly with mirth at the corners. Immediately, Raph was struck with the notion that his brother might actually have more up his sleeve than just making sure the Talk took forever and was as gross as possible. Staring back at that awful smile, Raph couldn't help thinking Mike might also have plans to rob Whoville blind and steal Christmas.

"You ARE!" Mike crowed at last, sitting forward and laughing. "You are, you totally are! There's no use denying it, bro. I can always tell." He leapt forward, grabbing Raph by the shell and trying to shake it

out of him. "NOW TELL ME! Tellmetellmetellme! I demand to know! I won't say anything to Leo and Don, I swear! I swear on my life! If I had pinkies, I would absolutely swear by them! So tell me! What is it? Did you do some stuff? Are you afraid Splinter's gonna find out? Are you afraid WE'RE gonna find out? Cause like, you shouldn't worry! Actually… lemme take that back. Except for Leo, you totally shouldn't even sweat it!"

"Would'ja leave it alone, Mike?" Raphael groaned, twisting his head around as far as it would go to avoid the other turtle's hopeful, over-eager gaze. "You don't know nothin' about it."

"You're right, I totally don't know… much. Heh. Pretty sure I know some, though. Stop being so dense and listen, Raph! Remember how well Don took my whole stupid first kiss thing? Well, since he's still the one in charge, this is like your big chance to finally come clean!"

"Lucky me," Raph muttered. "Come clean about *what* , 'zactly? Like, which part? With who? Tell me, where do YOU think I should start, if you know so much about it?"

Mike gave a series of slow blinks at these questions. "Dude. How the heck should I know?"

"Yeah, see?" Raph waved a hand of dismissal and looked away again. "S'cuz you DON'T know. So quit tryin' to play me like you got all this crap about me all figured out, when it's obvious you got nothin'! And just… stay the hell out of my business! You'll live longer."

"Awwww. Just tell 'em, Raph! WHOEVER it is you been seein'. All those times you go up to the surface and don't creep back in 'til after sunrise… There's just gotta be a girl behind some of 'em!"

Raph flashed a scowl at Mike before twisting away again, sending his stormy gaze off towards one of the brick walls. "Already came clean about those times, Mikey. I was doin' the Nightwatcher thing, remember? You know that. Hell, everybody knows that!"

"Uh-huh. Sure thing, bro. Cause' I mean, 'course you haven't EVER stayed out all night since Master Splinter took your stupid helmet away. Not even ONCE, right? Yeah, that's what I thought. Look, all I'm sayin' is, Splinter's the one who suddenly wants us to talk about all this stuff in the first place. So now it's like, instead of getting in trouble like you normally would, it will just be all – Raph's being way HONEST! And like, doing as he's told and stuff! Someone get the camera! Heh. So, yeah. Seriously, it's the perfect time. Are you gettin' any of what I'm sayin' here?"

"No, Mike. I ain't gettin' it. And you sure as hell don't seem to be gettin' it either! Look, will ya just drop it? Cause I ain't sayin' jack. Not to you, and not to any of them! If Splinter wanna know a whole buncha stuff about how wild and crazy I am, well," Raph hitched his shoulders in a defensive shrug. "Well, he can just drag me into his room like usual! And if I feel like it, *maybe* I'll spill." Raph bared his teeth at Michelangelo warningly. "But I swear, if you don't get out of my face right now with all yer lame advice and all these nosy questions, the only honest yer gonna get outta' me is an honest beat down. *Got it?* "

Mike sat back, looking sullen and disappointed. "Fine. Be all stupid and mysterious if you wanna. I'm just sayin', yer missing a golden opportunity here. Anyway, you're the lame one for tryin' to be so secretive when everybody already knows you got with that one Lucindra chick. Everyone except for Don, I mean. Cause, well, I keep hearin' you tell him that you don't need to hear any of what he's saying, and it's obvious to me why you're sayin' it. And probably obvious to Leo, too. But none of that is gonna fly with Donnie unless you back it up with some facts. Point-blank and to his face, you know? That's just how he is, all science-brained and oblivious. He's gotta have the facts all lined up and spelled out for him before he believes anything. And sometimes it sucks, but – if you can't talk to him about it, then you might as well just settle in and listen to what he's got to say like the rest of us n00bs. And maybe stop makin' his life miserable, already! Cause I gotta tell ya, that started getting old

like a year and a half ago. Which means by now, it's like… really, *really* old."

"Whoa! Fuck'sat supposed to mean?" Raph snarled, rising immediately to the new bait. "That ain't fair at all! You know I ain't done *shit* to him lately! HE'S the one still always ridin' my ass and startin' up shit with his stupid little comments, always correctin' every other word outta my mouth and cuttin' me down under his breath every time I turn around! N'here I was, stupid enough to hope that maybe once Leo got back we'd be cool again! Like, maybe if the pressure was off he could figure out how to stop bein' such a passive-aggressive little twat all the time, but – guess not, right? 'Cause here we are, what – three weeks in now? Yeah. Leo's been home for three whole weeks, and not a damn thing has changed! He's still the same – hey!"

Raph was cut short when Mike abruptly got up off the couch and started striding away from him. Throughout the whole rant his only response had been a flat stare, and now he was shaking his head slowly and stalking away at a quick pace. Raph saw that he was now heading towards the same archway through which Leo and Don had made their exit.

"Hey! Where d'ya think yer goin?" Raph called again, determined to stay where he was at first. But when Mike didn't acknowledge him, he finally dragged himself up off the comfort of the beat-up cushions and rose to follow him. After closing about half of the distance, he halted and hissed at his brother from where he stood. "Mike! Get back here, would'ja? Leave 'em alone. Ya gotta stop stickin' your nose where it ain't wanted, for cryin' out loud! Leo's got it covered!"

Mike ignored him, creeping on the balls of his feet now and carefully peeking around the corner once he reached it. "Huh. Coast's clear. Must have gone into the dojo," he called back, like Raph actually cared. Then he had rounded the corner and disappeared down the hallway.

Raph exhaled sharply, exasperated. Clearly Michelangelo was dead set on being a nosy little jerk tonight, and nothing Raph could say was likely to sway him. He went back to the couch and flumped down to wait for the eventual return of his brothers.

He decided to occupy the time with dreams of where he might go, and what all he might do, when Don's Talk was finally concluded and he could get the hell out of here. Any time he felt caged or suffocated by the close-quarters of the lair he had to share with his obnoxious, unfathomable brothers, the surface world seemed to call him like a distant siren. And during times like this one, when leaving was impossible, it was often enough for him just to dream of his above-ground adventures. For many years it had been a comfort to him, the idea that he had seen things his brothers would never see, and braved dangers his brothers would never face. Back home he was made to share almost everything, but these ghetto streets he watched over had became his somehow. He had made the choice to favor and protect them, and the lives of the people on those streets were better now because he bothered to look out for them. Such thoughts usually made him feel powerful – not stronger, but like he was in control of his life for once instead of eternally trapped by it.

Mostly Raphael only had to think of the surface world – his secret routes through the city, and the places he had claimed – and it would bring him comfort, some a sense of contentment, however small. Normally it would be enough to stall off that familiar feeling of restlessness whenever it began to gnaw impatiently at his insides.

It wasn't enough this time. He found his mind was working in circles now, always returning to the same bitter thought: whatever mischief he got into tonight would be no where near as bold or exhilarating as the sordid adventures he was having in his little brother's optimistic dreams.

"Alright, let's backtrack for a second. I still really don't know about this one. I can see what you're saying about why you feel the need to cover it, but – can't you see how easily a topic like this could take

a turn for the worse? You've got to promise me you're going to stay on task with it, Donnie. Oh, and there won't be any more gross visual aids, right? We do NOT need to see what that looks like."

Mike couldn't quite hear Don's answer to that. He couldn't get any closer without risking being seen. Donatello's responses were getting lower each time, now coming in increasingly bitter mumbles. He could tell that Don had been pushed nearly to the end of his patience.

Honestly, Mike couldn't blame him. He'd only been listening for a minute or two, and already there had been several things Leonardo had said – particularly, false assumptions he'd made about what they all could and couldn't 'handle' -- that had nearly caused Mike to storm into the dojo and give his oldest brother a piece of his mind.

"Michelangelo?"

Mike froze and widened his eyes at the sound of his full name. He backed away from the door and turned, creeping forward to stand before his master. "Hi, Master Splinter. So uh, how was your nap?"

His father ignored the pleasantries and got right to the point. "What are you doing out here? And why is Raphael sitting by himself in the common room?" The old rat's shrewd eyes swept over him, then lanced towards the entrance to the dojo. "Are your brothers in there?"

"Yeah, I guess," Mike admitted, ducking his head down and shrinking in on himself. It never sat well with him, the feeling of tattling on his brothers. On the other hand, it became easier when he stopped to consider who it was he was about to tattle on. He knew that if their situations were reversed, Leonardo would not hold back from telling Master Splinter exactly what had happened and how he felt about it. "Leo and Raph ganged up on Donnie and then Leo said the class was on hiatus. And now he's in there bossing Don around, talkin' about what he can and can't say in front of us. He's all, take out this part, and this part, and all these parts gotta go... And poor Donnie! I

mean, he was up all night working on this lesson. He did a really good job and put all this work into it, and now Leo's in there just tearin' it apart!"

"I see," Splinter frowned, sparing him a glance and then looking back towards where they could now both hear Leonardo speaking up to assert himself.

"Alright. Fine then, so long as there's no pictures or the descriptions don't get too graphic. But this one – ok, do I even need to explain myself for this one?"

"Yes, Leo." Don's voice was flat but clear to hear this time. "I think you had better. I'm trying to be open minded here, but like I told you, I am not making any changes without good justification."

"I'm not sitting around discussing that with my *brothers,* Don. It's disgusting!"

"If you think that's disgusting, you're even more repressed than I thought."

" *What* did you just say to me?"

"Yes!" Mike whispered, pumping a fist in the air. "Finally! Tell him where he can stick it, Don!"

Splinter cleared his throat softly, causing Mike to remember whose company he was in.

"Erk… Sorry Master Splinter," he apologized lamely.

"You know what, Leo? It's really become clear to me by now that you have very strong values and a rigid set of personal beliefs when it comes to sex. Yes, I can see now that above all else I must make sure to respect that."

Mike could read Don well enough to know that crisp tone and the subtle note of sarcasm that had crept into his words did not bode

well for Leonardo. He was sure Leo had heard it too. His oldest brother responded in kind, his words dripping with false courtesy as he replied, "Well, I'm so glad to hear it, Donnie. It seems we're finally getting somewhere."

"Yes. Spirits forbid that I should be the one to trespass on your personal beliefs. I think maybe Splinter will allow it if I recommend that you be excused from this Talk after all."

Oh man , thought Mike. *Is he really giving up on Leo?*

"Wow. Well, I'm… yeah! That sounds great. It's just… what about Raph? He doesn't wanna sit through it any more than I do. You should let him go too."

"Oh, no. Raph's staying. At least until he comes up with some good justification for himself. In the meantime, I'm sure Splinter will understand and agree to it if I develop a private lesson for you instead. You know, one better suited to accommodate all your weird hang—um, your very strong values."

"Now, wait just one second. I don't need any private lesson…"

"You have nothing to worry about, Leo. This next lesson plan is going to be right up your alley!"

"Is that so?" There was a dangerous note in Leonardo's voice now. Mike leaned forward in suspense.

"Absolutely! There will be no cursing, no goofing off, and no visual aids to speak of. Well, nothing with graphic pictures anyway. We can still do things like maybe develop a chart that plots all sexual acts into one of the following categories based on their appropriateness: Okay So Long as You Don't Talk About It, Probably Shouldn't, Don't Do It, and Completely Unthinkable."

"Now you're just asking for it…" Leo snarled.

"Let me through, my son. I have heard enough."

"But sensei, it's just finally getting good!" Mike pleaded quietly.

"I'm perfectly serious! Mostly, in this new class we'll just be promoting a long and lonely life spent married to duty, honoring one's family, and devoting oneself to *ninjutsu* …"

" *Move away from the door* , Michelangelo," Splinter ordered again. This time Mike reluctantly stepped aside.

"It will be great. And here's the best part! You can still jerk off, so long as you feel mildly ashamed of yourself afterw—nhf!"

Splinter burst into the room just in time to see them both hit the ground.

Leonardo was atop Donatello now, closing both hands around his throat. "How DARE you say that to me! How dare you do any of this? Endangering our family… encouraging your brothers to do the same? THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!"

"Gkkh…"

"Leonardo!

"I WON'T STAND BY AND LET YOU TEACH THEM THINGS THAT COULD DESTROY US ALL! HOW DARE YOU—!"

"LEONARDO! You will let your brother up this instant!" For the second time that morning, Splinter's staff came down with a sharp crack that commanded silence. The chaotic tableau froze.

Bail

Author's Note: Well my genre of choice is dramedy, as many of you know - and that means drama and comedy combined. This chapter is a bit heavier on the drama than some of you may be used to, compared to most of the Talk chapters that have been put up so far. This was a very tough monster of a chapter to write, I might add. Transitional chapters can be such a cruel mistress! In any case, sorry I've been writing so slow lately but I've been telling anyone who asks that I haven't given up on any of my fics. So here's the proof! Hope you enjoy! XOXO Winny

Chapter Eleven: Bail

Once again Raphael found himself engaged in that all too familiar struggle: trying not to explode. Unfortunately, he had an awful lot of reasons to be genuinely ticked off at the moment, and they were all working against him. *Like having to sit through a "sex ed" class taught by that dork wasn't reason enough! And just when things are finally turning around and it looks like Don might actually get what's coming to him, wouldn't you know it? I MISS ALL THE ACTION!*

Leo barely got two words out before Donatello pulled his trump card, demanding the right to speak first as the one primarily responsible for their actions and blah blah blah… Just who did he think he was, anyway? Did Donnie think this switcheroo Splinter pulled was for *real?* Did he think that he could be even HALF the leader that Leo was to them?

Now they were RIGHT back where they had been stuck the night before: waiting around Donnie to finish blabbing Master Splinter's head off. Except this time was much worse, because the topic at hand was no mystery. *He's in there crying his case to Splinter about how we're screwing up his stupid sex lesson! Boo hoo, Raph and Leo are ganging up on me! How am I supposed to teach those*

imbeciles anything? They're too scared to even talk about the basic facts!

Rrghh, Raphael's thoughts blazed, *fucking Don!* He gripped his sai tighter as he whirled, starting back on his path. He had been pacing the length of hallway that led away from Splinter's door for the past ten minutes.

An explosion seemed imminent.

It's gonna be okay though, he reminded himself fiercely *. Leo's gonna get his chance to defend us.* His older brother had a certain knack for making Splinter see his side of things. He was probably going to turn this whole thing around in no time, just as soon as it was their turn to explain themselves. *And if Leo's not gettin' all worked up over this mess—*

-Aw, shit.

Raphael snuck a glance at his brother and flinched. Leo didn't seem *angry* , but he was beginning to look mighty concerned.

Raph was sure he didn't mean to betray his worry... After all, he was still seated in the lotus position against the wall, his hands clasped and his eyes closed. He had put several feet of deliberate distance between himself and Splinter's door, just in case Don or their sensei emerged from counsel abruptly. He was being very careful to maintain a patient and outwardly respectful appearance, but Raphael knew how to read his oldest brother lately. It was both comforting and eerie at once, how familiarity could steal over them both without warning and transport them back into the bond they had shared in their distant youth, back before all the rivalry and resentment had grown up between them.

The truth was it had taken Raph less than a minute to see through that bullshit act of 'pretending to meditate like a good little boy'. His older sibling was alert and fully conscious, of that he was sure. Not only that, but Raph had immediately suspected Leo was pouring all

his concentration into honing his senses. He was trying his damnedest to listen in on them. *What, are ya kidding me? Did you forget that it's Splinter and DON in there…?* Donatello was never one to raise his voice or make defiant outbursts, such as were signature to Raph and Splinter's counsels. On top of that, he had a tendency to mumble under his breath and spoke in muted tones by default. *Uh-huh. Good luck with that, pal.* Leo's efforts had seemed like a pointless waste of time.

Early on, however, Raphael made a conscious decision to ignore his brother rather than get up in his face about it. The decision was a rare one. Leo had always been shameless in his belief that, as a ninja and an authority figure, he had every right to spy on the rest of them. Normally this never failed to rub Raphael the wrong way, and today was really no exception. But his brother's penchant for being a miserable snoop was not at the top of his Reasons To Be Pissed Off At The World list at just this moment. Leo *wasn't* his enemy right now, he kept telling himself, and so for once in his life Raph had decided that he should just let it slide.

But as the minutes ticked by, the annoying behavior became increasingly hard to ignore. Even the air seemed heavier as he passed closer to where his brother was seated. Actually... it was more than just that. His feet beneath him began to slap against the concrete every time he paced nearer to Leo. The angry pounding of his heart grew thunderous in his ears. As the prickle of Raph's suspicion grew into full blown realization, his furious pace slowed and finally came to a halt. He knew then, with what felt like certainty, that he was not imagining it. Leo was channeling his *chi* , using some dirty trick to supernaturally enhance his hearing. *Unbelievable!*

As he approached, sure enough, every trace of his brother's earlier concern wiped clean off his face. The pinch of tension between his brow ridges, that slightly pensive frown – all gone, like they had never been. Now his face was as neutral as carved stone.

Several more steps brought him close enough to effectively loom over his brother. To his credit, Leo managed to endure the baleful

accusation in Raphael's gaze without so much as a flinch, maintaining a flawless outward illusion of stillness and serenity. But Raph was able to take satisfaction in the reaction he got from his brother just the same. He felt the charged air between them normalize as Leonardo's legendary concentration broke to pieces. Not only that, but as close as he was standing now, Raph swore that he could even smell the truth pouring off of him in waves; it was written out plain as day in the silent language that was his brother's pheromones: a sharp stab of alarm that dissipated quickly into steady new caution… a subtle hint of sour sweat that was probably Leo's embarrassment. Oh, yeah… one might not know it to look at him, but Raphael was getting the distinct impression that his sibling was squirming inside.

The feeling of victory Raphael enjoyed from this deduction was short-lived. Then bitterness reclaimed him, and he turned away with a derisive snort. *M'gonna let it go this time, just cause' we both got better things to worry about,* he thought, reaffirming his earlier resolve and launching back into restless motion. *But don't kid yourself, Leo. You don't fool me.*

Raphael wrapped his hands around the handles of his sai and squeezed the leather grips tightly as his desire for some way to release his pent up energy and tension grew increasingly desperate. Right now that conscious death grip on his weapons was all that was keeping him from driving one of his fists into the nearest wall. He willed himself to calm down. He tried to stave off the feeling by pacing faster, and then tried counting every other stride. Still the feeling rose in him like growing panic, and his hands ached to strike something. Instead he flexed each of his fingers and waited for the urge to pass.

It was a specific, still-fresh memory that kept springing into his mind, and ultimately stayed his hand. Leo had been too honest with him recently…

"Easy. I'm not goin' anywhere, okay? Now go on, sit yer ass down. Here, m'gonna drag this trash can right here next to the bed. Just so, uh – yeah. In case ya' need it."

"Rrgh..."

"Actually..." Raphael grimaced and snatched up the can again, holding it out. "Kinda lookin' like you might need it now."

When Leo wouldn't acknowledge it, he sank down onto the bed beside him and continued to offer it stubbornly. "S'fine," his brother insisted in a low growl, putting up a clumsy protest by shoving at the trash can and finally prying it away from Raph by force. "Quit it, will you? S'just... all the spinning. But… s'fine. M'good. Anyway—" After forcing him to set the waste bin down, he wouldn't let go of Raph's hand; instead he tugged it closer to his face and peered down at it as he mumbled, "—least you're not."

Raph didn't follow this. The truth was, despite his iron stomach and a natural talent for keeping steady on his feet, he was pretty trashed himself. It had been a crazy night. "M'not what…?"

"Spinning," Leo elaborated in a distracted voice, like it should have been obvious. He did not look up from what had become an up close and-personal-space-invading study of Raphael's knuckles.

He grew increasingly baffled by Leo's random show of fascination. Finally Raph tilted his head down and to the side, seeking some explanation that might be written on Leo's face. Almost immediately, he regretted it. An unmistakable sadness had stolen over his brother's expression, genuine and plain to see. "God, Raph..."

"Don't hurt," Raph assured him, vaguely embarrassed by now and wishing for his hand back.

"It does," Leo said in a hushed voice, like he was in a trance and reading some hidden message in the many crisscrossing scars. "Goes right through me… every time I have to watch you..." Then he

flushed and suddenly seemed to grow more aware of himself, letting go of his hand and burrowing his face against Raph's shoulder to muffle a sheepish apology. "Sorry! I din'… w'zzn trying t'nag."

"No," Raph said quietly, "it's a lousy habit. Splinter don't like it much, either."

Leo shifted his head against Raph's shoulder and gazed thoughtfully into the darkness. "Splinner says… he says y' doan always mean to."

"You guys... talked about me?"

"Yeah," Leo said the words like an easy sigh, closing his eyes. "All'a time."

Raphael had no idea what to say to that and fell silent for a long time. Finally he managed to speak, his voice low with embarrassment, "Hey, look. I can knock it off, okay? F' it's been buggin' you so much. I mean, I can try to."

"Mmn," Leo murmured. Raphael looked down and noted wryly that his brother was nearly fast asleep.

He had taken huge relief in the fact that Leo was so out of it. Raph knew he probably would not remember one word of their exchange. But in the end it didn't really matter much, except to help spare their pride.

A promise was a promise, just the same.

By the time Raphael reached the other end of the hallway he had lost count of his steps. Lost in memories of the night prior, his furious pace had gradually become a slow trudge. Overcome with a strange pang, he stopped and stared at the wall ahead for a moment before looking back over his shoulder at Leonardo. His brother still hadn't

moved, sitting with his legs folded neatly beneath him and his eyes gently closed.

Last night… last night they had been so close. Now the separation between them was almost palpable. What was it Leo had said?

Don't worry. I'm sure it won't last…

Raphael caught himself in time to drag himself away from this train of thought before it could topple him headlong into fatalistic speculation. *Stomping around and coming up with new reasons to mope is not gonna solve a damn thing.*

He set his jaw and stalked towards Leonardo with new determination.

"…just unreasonable."

"Who is being unreasonable?"

"You. This *whole thing* , it's completely… "

"Donatello, we have been over this."

This was how it had been for as long as he had been listening. Round and round they went, getting no where. Leonardo kept waiting for Don to say something scathing and critical, something that would point fingers at himself or at Raph… but the accusations never came.

It was… *annoying* . When Leo realized his own reaction, it had given him pause. Could he really have been *hoping* to hear slanderous words coming from his brainy brother? *Why on earth would anyone want that?*

Maybe he just wanted a reason to hold onto his anger. That had to be it.

The upcoming confrontation would be so much easier if he could storm into Splinter's room in a blaze, armed with fresh insult... By listening in, he had been hoping to go in already having prepared his counterattack. *But how the shell am I supposed to counter an opponent who refuses to strike?*

It was all very sobering. Now there was nothing to do but rally against the onset of his inevitable regret. He fiercely called to mind some of the horrible things Don had said to him right before their confrontation got physical, but it was no use. Try as he may, some part of Leonardo already could see that he had been way out of line.

He had attacked one of his brothers. Not for his own good, or to teach Don some kind of lesson – no. He had acted in anger. Worse yet, he had acted in fear. And maybe also for all the reasons he had shouted – because he truly believed most of what Don was preaching, the risks he had already taken, everything he was condoning – all of these things posed a very real threat to their secret way of life.

But that's not the whole truth, is it?

Leonardo did not want to lie to himself anymore. If he was going to stay true to that resolve, then he would have to put these lesser truths aside and face the real reason Don's words had provoked him. He knew that his uncommonly violent reaction had less to do with any concern for the rest of them, and more to do with how Don's lesson threatened him personally.

Gradually Leo became aware of the silence. The thread of concentration he had cast into his father's room had snapped and he could no longer hear them. Leonardo cursed himself for allowing his troubled thoughts to distract him so completely and groped with his senses until he had retrieved the tattered ends of their hushed conversation.

"…speak honestly? Well, that's what..."

"It is vital that they understand. You said so yourself, just the night before last. Were you being honest then?"

"… my *brothers* . You can't expect…"

"I see. So after all of your preparations – after you have given me your word – you would give up? Is that your choice?"

"…didn't know it would be…"

What's this? Doctor Ruth is going to throw in the towel, just like that? Leo could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

The swell of relief that had been filling up his chest began to deflate as reality sank in. *Fat chance,* he thought with a sharp exhale that was almost a huff and not quite an exasperated sigh. *Yeah, it'd be nice if this miserable situation could be resolved just because Don's had enough. But if it was really something that he* swore *to do…* Leonardo let go of his hope then, certain that Splinter would not release Don so easily.

He strained to make out the rest of what Don was saying, and had *almost* secured a decent lock on him when he noticed that Raphael was back to bother him some more. Now that he'd realized it, and come up wholly from his channeling, the weight of Raph's penetrating gaze was unmistakable. Much to his embarrassment, Leo could not even say for sure how long his brother had been standing there.

No , came his chagrined afterthought. *Not standing, after all.* Looking without eyes, his chi clearly illuminated his brother's fiery spirit against the shadowy backdrop of the nearby dead surfaces. He could now see Raph settled in what looked like a comfortable crouch, poised on the balls of his feet with his arms draped casually over his knees. Right smack dab in front of him.

Ignoring Raph might have worked the first time, but Leonardo suspected that waiting for him to simply get bored and wander off

was not going to work again. There was something *different* about his attention. He could not be sure without probing deeper than either *sensei* would condone, but his attention immediately struck Leo as less hostile than before – and at the same time, twice as stubborn. His brother's presence was uncommonly still and otherwise impenetrable from this distance.

Rather well guarded, actually – considering that it's Raph, Leo mused with chagrin, almost impressed with him. *Wonder when he learned that, or if it was even on purpose?*

The disruption of knowing that his brother continued to squat there, less than two feet in front of him, waiting, watching him… He would think too often about keeping still. His anxiety and flagging confidence would weaken him, and then he would lose all precision and subtlety in his attempts to compensate. He would get sloppy, possibly even detectable by Master Splinter… It was no good.

The timing is a shame, of course. I can always trust Raph to pick the worst possible time to interrupt… He stirred and let his eyes slide open, calm and vaguely wry as he demanded, "What do you want, Raph?"

His brother's shoulders rose and fell: a small gesture, defensive. He watched Leo warily, pressing his lips together as if in some last minute debate with himself, before finally suggesting, "You wanna get the hell out of here?"

Leonardo's eyes widened. He blinked once before lowering his chin to give Raph a look of reprimand. "You mean leave? Right now? When Splinter specifically told us not to go anywhere?" He scrunched his eyes shut, shaking his head wearily. "Raph... please tell me you're not serious."

"Fuck yeah, I'm serious! They're gonna be at it for *hours* , Leo – you KNOW they will! And they actually expect us to sit out here like chumps, bitin' our nails and goin' crazy, wonderin' what the fuck is goin' on in there… didn't you get enough of that *last* night? Now look,

we got plenty of time. Bet we could make it back before anybody even knows we—"

"Raph!" Leo cut him off sharply, leaning forward to glower at him. "My answer is no. Now don't ask me again! Right now my priority is figuring out how to get us in LESS trouble with Master Splinter. Leaving the lair when he specifically said not to – Raph, what are you *thinking?* That's the worst possible thing we could do!"

Leo didn't expect that to be the end of it. Raph had always been predictable – in many regards, but in situations like this one especially. He was simply not a one-lecture-does-the-trick sort of guy, in Leo's experience. So he fully expected Raph to carry on with some more snarling, aggressive-defensive rationale, or maybe launch into an ugly string of personal attacks. This was the part where he would typically call Leo a butt-kisser, a do-gooder, teacher's pet - the list of possibilities went on and on really, but the meaning was always the same.

Leonardo held his brother's gaze, staring him down firmly, waiting for all of this. But Raph just looked back at him with the heavy ridge of his brow drawn, like he had forgotten his lines.

Then he dropped his eyes and took to his feet, muttering, "Whatever. Just forget it."

That was Leo's first clue that something had gone very wrong.

"That's it?" Almost immediately, Leo was aware of how stupid he was for giving Raph a hard time over this strange show of non-resistance. It should have been a blessing. But knowing was not enough to stop the flak which continued to fly from his mouth, entirely without his accord. "Just… 'forget it'? No attempts to persuade me by implying that I really won't do it because I'm scared? No suggesting that I need this because the way I choose to live is boring and pathetic? No colorful, inappropriate speculations about Splinter's walking stick or Don's weapon or something being shoved up my – well, someplace uncomfortable?"

At least he had managed steer his barrage of questions into more light-hearted territory, but it all came out in sort of a desperate rush that made Leo want to cringe and start over. He could hear it in his voice: his concern was too transparent. And true to form, Raph would not give him the relief of a snorted laugh, or that low, back-of-the throat chuckle; he did not even crack smile.

"Fuck off, Leo," Raph growled, turning away. He continued to mutter as he stalked off without so much as a pause or a glance back, "F'yer lookin' to get knocked around and hear a bunch of smack-talk, why don't you pick a fight with Mikey? He should be bored enough."

Leo took to his feet quickly, intending to keep up with him. "Raph, wait!" he called after him, but it was mostly a formality. The Raphael *he* knew would not wait for anyone if he had a choice. His hand shot forward, readying to stop his brother even as he said this, seizing Raph by his bicep and about to yank him back – but not quite following through with it. "I just have to… ask…"

The gesture, his accompanying words – everything was aborted then, as Raphael's obedience belatedly registered. He was still staring straight ahead, wearing a glare that could peel paint off a wall. But he had come to a halt even before Leo had grabbed him, and that was the second clue.

As for the third clue… well, that one was a problem. There should never have been a third clue.

But there it was, and Leonardo could only recoil from it, yanking back his hand along with his awareness. His face flushed hot, acutely ashamed of himself at once, dropping his gaze to the floor.

Some part of him flared up with wholly irrational anger at his brother then, for being the way that he was – the way he had always been. While his guilt turned slow, lurching somersaults in the pit of his stomach, there was some righteous child in his head throwing a temper tantrum. *That's not fair! RAPH'S the one keeping himself locked up tight with all those shields one minute, and then going*

around, being so – so GLARINGLY LOUD the next. It's his own stupid fault, bleeding his feelings all over the place like that!

Leo was having trouble thinking clearly with this bellowing ruckus in his head. He pictured himself facing off with the arrogant child he had been and glared down at his younger self with stern reproach. Stupidly brave, the little turtle glared right back at him. He slowly drew back his hand and the little beast's round amber eyes went huge, and then – with a very satisfying CRACK – the voice was silenced.

Leo shook his head as if to clear it and went back to staring helplessly at Raph.

"Ask – what?" his brother eventually prompted, speaking each word slowly through his clenched teeth. His patience had worn dangerously thin.

"Ask you… right, I just had to – make sure—"

Raph's hands flew up and apart in an appeal to the ceiling. "Of?" he spat, sounding thoroughly exasperated. Of course, Leo knew better.

Leonardo continued to fumble and finally recovered lamely, "I just wanted to make sure that you're – um, that you're okay." Actually, he had wanted to make sure Raph didn't still plan to leave the lair, with or without Leo... but it seemed like a silly, offensive thing to ask him, now that he already knew the answer.

Raph wasn't going to leave. Or if he did, he wasn't going to go far, or be gone for very long... If he did go, it would only be because he *had* to, because such a sorrow had grown in him that he was no longer sure he could contain it...

"M'fine," Raph finally grumped, pulling away, back to predictable. It might have been comforting, except that Leo knew it was a lie, such an obvious lie, and now the certainty of it sat in him like a cold lump of lead.

He wasn't fine. He was reeling inside from some pain, swift and disabling, like sharp kick to the bridge. It made his eyes burn, and his palms itch, and every joint in his knuckles began to throb and ache… Leo could only stare after him in bewilderment, flexing his fingers without realizing he was doing it, watching his brother shuffle off down the hall.

It all seemed so absurd when he compared the reaction to everything that had just transpired. *That was NOT what I would call a terribly long lecture. Not by my standards. I'm pretty sure Mike would fall down on his knees and* thank *me if I ever let him off the hook with a lecture like that! And… yeah, okay, maybe I could have been nicer when I turned him down. But, no… it still doesn't add up. He has heard so much worse from me! It's got to be something else.*

It's not that I offended him, Leo realized abruptly. *What I felt from him wasn't insult. It had been hollow, lonely… almost like he was* mourning *something.* But who or what Raph had lost, or how he had lost it, Leo still could not say.

Clearly he had hurt Raph's feelings somehow, let him down in some serious way. But Leo still had no idea what he might have done, or if it was something he had said…

It was a mystery, to be sure – but did it really matter? Raph needed him. Leonardo gave himself a shake and started after the other turtle.

"What are you following me for?" Raph finally turned with an irritable snap, as they were halfway to the dojo. "Don't you have more meditating to do?"

"Raph… I just wanted to say, I'm really sorry."

"You didn't do anythin'."

Leo looked at him with dismay. He wasn't sure where to begin. "Look, I shouldn't have been so rude to you just now. And before

that, with Splinter, I know you were counting on me back there to defend us. I should have done something, said something that would make him listen to us, and instead I completely dropped the ball—"

The other turtle turned to him with an incredulous look and finally cut him off with a huge roll of his eyes. "Oh, knock it off already. Wasn't a thing you could've done to make it turn out any different."

"I could have done something besides just *stand there* with my mouth hanging open! I could have—"

"Yeah, yeah… coulda, shoulda, woulda. Quit beatin' yourself up and listen to me when I tell you that I'm not about to blame you for any of that crap. It's just like I said before: whoever he puts in charge, that's who he's gonna go to for answers when it turns into a big freakin' mess." His massive shoulders rolled in a half-hearted shrug as he concluded flatly, "It ain't rocket science, Leo. That shit played out exactly the way I said it would."

"You did say all that," Leo agreed quietly, frowning down at the ground between them. "I guess… you were right all along."

"Yer damn right, I was. Now, if you're done crying about it, could ya —"

"Actually, there's more. I—" Leo knew Raph was trying to get him to go away, but he couldn't leave it at that.

"Ah, Christ." Raph angled himself more towards Leo but still wouldn't look at him head on. "Course there would be more. I mean, what was I thinking?"

"Look, I'm being serious—"

"Leonardo… bein' *serious?* Get the fuck out."

"Okay, *enough.* " Leo flashed a stiff smile at him and spoke the words slowly through his bared teeth, "Now listen, because I am not

going away until I get this off my chest. So I strongly suggest that you stop trying to chase me off by acting like a jerk and let me finish."

"Wha…? You think I'm chasin' you off? Hey, not a chance! You gotta cry some more? Well, you go right ahead, Leo. You can cry all day, if you wanna!" He brought up one fist and thumped it right above the upper left-hand side of his plastron, cracking a wicked grin. "Look, I got yer shoulder right here."

Leo gave up his plans to have a serious heart to heart with Raph then and there. Actually, as soon he put it to himself that way, he began to suspect it had been a doomed effort from the start. So maybe it really was for the best just to roll with it and goof around.

"Uh," Leo's forced smile became a grimace, beak wrinkling with distaste. "Wow, that's just – so great of you, Raph. And while it does sound terribly comfy and all, um… *yeah.* Sorry. Think I'll pass."

"Aww, c'mon! Ya sure? Cause', you know I always wanna be there for ya. Specially for big cryin' hysterical hissy fits. Wouldn't dream of missin' those. I mean, what are brothers for?"

"You know, Raph," Leo shot back dryly, "sometimes I really wonder."

"Would'ja listen to you?" Raph broke into a full grin and turned his palms up. "Geez! Where's the *love?* "

"Okay, you know what? I take it ALL BACK. Go back to being a jerk. Right this instant."

"What the hell is this shit?" Raph pressed his palm to his chest, feigning shock. "I open up my HEART to you, and ya' just… ya wanna *throw it all away?* "

"Yes. This caring, sensitive, super nice brother? I am throwing him away." Leo stabbed at Raph's plastron with one finger and eyed him very sternly, somehow managing to keep a straight face. "I want my

jerk back and I want him *now* , got that? At least the jerk I knew how to handle. This weirdly nice guy, I don't know who he is. He creeps me out. So, yes. We will dispose of him at once. Agreed?"

Raph smacked Leo's hand away and seemed to think it over. "So you want me to be like… crap, I think I'm out of practice. Ya gotta gimme a minute. Just, uh…" He looked up suddenly, "Hey, I got it! Instead of lettin' you cry all over me, how about I just call you a whiny little bitch and smack you around some?"

"I'll probably have to beat you to a pulp – for the sake of my honor or something, but yeah, sure. That's totally him. Perfect, actually. So just keep that up and we're golden. Okay?"

"Roger that," Raphael cackled and shook his head at Leo in disbelief. "Oh, hold up. That was all wrong, wasn't it? I gotta do that over."

"Yeah, you'd better," Leo agreed, folding his arms and arching his brows critically. "I expect at least five minutes of griping and angry rebuttal for every order I give you. Got it?"

"Five whole minutes! Are you kidding me? I don't got time for that kinda rebuttal…" He shook a fist in front of him, hamming it up. "Yeah, fuck you, I ain't doin' that! Five lousy minutes… I'll show your ma a pretty good five minutes, how ya like that?" Leo's brows shot up at this, and Raph laughed and made some slashing gestures with his hands, "No, wait, strike that one. I fucked it up."

"I'll say. Might I remind you that the objective here is to be your usual jerk-like self? So please, no turning into Mikey on me. One of him is well and good, but if I have to deal with any more than that I'm going on a homicidal rampage."

"Right. No more momma jokes, I got it." Raph nodded like he was taking notes in his head, then launched back into playacting. "Five minutes! I'll show you five minutes, you fucking slave driver! Fuck you AND your five minutes! Waltzin' in here, always pushin' me

around, tryin' to rule my life. You got a lot of goddamned nerve, thinkin' I'm just gonna roll over and give you five minutes any time you say somethin'. Well you can fuck right off! That's five minutes a' my life you're wastin', huh? Did you think about that?" He paused to look aside at Leo and mutter, "So - how'm I doin?"

Leo gave him a cheerful thumbs-up.

"How long's it been, anyway?"

"About thirty… maybe forty seconds of griping?"

Raph shook his head and swore under his breath. "Fuck. Got a ways to go yet." He looked up at Leo and scrunched his face to confess amusedly, "Bein' me is hard work."

"Looks like it. But you know, it's not any easier being me. For every five minutes I get out of you, I get to fork over at least fifteen or twenty explaining why my orders are necessary and absolutely the right thing to—"

Leo broke off what he was saying abruptly and both turtles went very still. A strange noise had come from the other end of the hall, startling both of them.

"What the hell—?" Raph wondered, but he was asking this to Leo's shell. The other turtle had already started back the way they'd come, moving towards Splinter's room. A moment later Raph was following him and looking around warily. "Kinda sounded like it came from in there, like – maybe somebody threw someth—?"

"Be quiet, will you?" Leo hissed, holding his hand up.

"After five minutes of bitching about it, maybe I will," Raph retorted.

Leo smacked his arm and shot him a playful glare before turning his attention back to listening for anything out of the ordinary.

There was only silence. It seemed like whatever commotion they'd overheard had ended swiftly. Beside him, Raph was growing impatient, starting to frown and shift his weight. He seemed to grow less comfortable with the idea of eavesdropping with every peaceful moment that passed.

"Look, whatever it was – everything's fine now. Let's go to the dojo and spar or—"

"I just CAN'T! I can't DO this anymore! I need you to stop, just - STOP! STOP ASKING ME!"

Leonardo and Raphael both froze, staring at one another. Then they slowly dragged their stunned gazes to look towards their father's door.

Raph's brow was wrinkled in confusion. "That's…"

"Don," Leo confirmed in hush. He understood the sentiment. The hysterical voice coming out of that room hardly sounded like their brother at all.

"I can't take it! I can't, I just… can't! I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS ANYMORE!"

When it came again they were both waiting for it, but it still made their skin crawl. "This is fucked up" Raph muttered, backing away and shaking his head slowly. "I can't listen to this."

For all that he had been eavesdropping earlier… Leonardo had to admit that he didn't want to hear it either. Not this. He'd never heard Don fight with Splinter like this. And Don, who was usually so calm and put-together all of the time… he had sounded completely unraveled! Leo knew he would be so embarrassed to hear that two of his brothers had overheard that. Already the outburst made him feel dirty, like some kind of peeping tom, for peeking in on this moment of weakness that had left his cautious brother so exposed.

But at the same time, he was the leader. How could he *not* stay and listen? What if something was wrong? Was Don psychotic? How could he not have the first CLUE what was going on in there?

This paradox would drive him insane in no time flat. Leo was sure of it.

He pulled his gaze away from the door with great effort and looked over his shoulder. Raph was looking back at him, clearly freaked out, his wide eyes begging Leo to come with him, away from the door, and whatever crazy scene was taking place behind it.

Leo swallowed once and nodded, starting forward. He came to stand face to face with Raph, wearing that strange grim look which meant he'd just made an important decision.

"Dojo?" Raph offered again, sounding as spooked as he looked. "You, uh…" He let the rest trail off and gestured instead, jerking a thumb over one shoulder.

"It looks like you were right again."

"I was? I mean, 'course I was. What was I right about?"

"There's no way they're coming out of that counsel any time soon. Not after that." Leonardo drew a deep breath and looked at him very seriously. "Hey… Raph? Tell me, did you still want to get out of here?"

Raphael opened his mouth, then closed it again. He began to study Leo like it might be a trick question. "Are ya' serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious. Let's bail. If you still want to go, I'm with you."

Leo knew he should be knotted up with anxiety. After all, he didn't even know where they were going, how long it would take them, or how likely it was that they'd be seen. There was no way at all for him to plan. There were thousands of things that could go wrong. It was

still, without a doubt, the worst possible thing they could have decided to do. Naturally, he had expected he would be a nervous wreck for pretty much the whole trip.

Instead, it was like a great weight had lifted right off of him. To be free, and young, and not alone for once in his stupid lonely life… just for a few stolen moments, but goddamn, it felt good.

He gave Raph, who still hadn't said anything, a small, encouraging grin. Apparently his brother needed a few more moments to just stand there wearing a dumbfounded look. Finally he bobbed his head at Leo in an urgent nod.

"Right," Leo ticked a half-grin and gestured to get him moving. "Well then, you had better lead the way."

The Split

Chapter 12 – The Split

"What's wrong?"

Leonardo peered up past the brim of his fedora hat. It was That Sub Place On 9th. "Nothing," he said with a barely disguised grimace.

"Hey, just trust me, okay? This place is the fucking slam. Hey, look!" Raph pulled his hand from his pocket, pleased at the coincidence. "I even got a coupon."

Leo leaned forward and peered down at it with a suspicious frown. "Mike had a coupon just like that."

Raph beamed wickedly. "Won it from him sparring after practice. Free chips. Booyah." He stuffed it back into his pocket and sauntered towards the entrance. Leonardo grinned at his enthusiasm and had no choice then but to shuffle in after him.

"Go away!"

"Renet. Do we have to have a talk about your attitude? I don't care what the grade cards are saying lately. If you can't conduct yourself in a professional manner... Girl, I demand more respect than you've been showing me lately! That, and a full explanation about what's been going on between you and your little green house guest. RENET! Open this door! Do NOT make me put on the booming scaryface of ultimate power, because I'm telling you, I'll do it!"

"Yeah, so?" she croaked "That stupid face of yours stopped being scary my second term! Anyway, Don showed me that movie. Some great mentor! You completely ripped off the whole idea. You deserve to get sued by the people who wrote that Oz Wizard movie."

"Oz-? Ech, never mind! I'll hear no more of your diversions! Renet, you have ten seconds to open this door and tell me everything that's lead up to this latest-"

"I don't KNOW what's going on down there! And I don't care! I called in sick, okay? They already approved it! Go check for yourself and leave me ALONE!"

"Well, there's a relief. I'd hate to tell the council that you were away from your post without an excused leave when one of your patch jobs tore open. So which moron do you have watching the spheres in your place?"

"J-Jonas..."

"Oh, I see. You'll just trust his fate to Jonas, then? You'll send a duster to fetch your troublesome lover and put things right? Or have you just decided to let him unravel enough of the third spiral that we'll have no choice but to send in the Unweavers to deal with him?" Lord Simultaneous gave a low whistle so lacking in concern as to almost sound amused at the situation. " *Oy vey* , Miss Tilley. It must have been some fight."

Silence followed. The Time Lord knew that his warning had reached her at last.

The quiet was broken by a round of messy nose-blowing and the abrupt scrape of her chair over the worn stone tiles. Her guilded door opened a crack and his young student appeared, looking down at him almost timidly. She was far less lovely with those tear-ruddy and puffy, unpainted eyes, but infinitely more pitiable. Her hair must not have been tended since she'd taken off her head piece, as it now hung frazzled and unkempt past her pale shoulders. She came out several more steps and clutched her robe tighter around her generous frame, peering down at him and plainly miserable.

"About time," the Time Lord grumbled sourly. It wouldn't do to show her sympathy. She was far too coddled already.

"Amber alert?" she confirmed in a small voice. She lifted her gaze to stare up at the lights mounted in the hall behind him.

"Fraid so, dear. They've already petitioned for right of entry. Just a small force. You'd probably know all of this by now if your comm link had been left open, or if you hadn't been sealed in here feeling sorry for yourself for the past three hours."

"I need to... Gah, I'm so not even presentable. Please, Lord S., Just... just give me a moment." She turned away and slipped back into her room, leaving the door ajar and moving towards one of her dressers with increasingly apparent panic. Tossing open one of the middle drawers, she began to dig frantically for enough clean pieces of her overly-complicated, custom-sewn get-up she called uniform. "Crap. Okay. Maybe a few moments..." A flurry of rejected pieces were tossed over her shoulder, vaguely in the direction of her flamboyant pillow pit.

"Rrr! Piles of suck and lame! I could have SWORN I sent this off to be mended! Gah, I totally know did! Here's the stitches. But it must not have been strong enough... tore right open again. Oh my god. Focus. Shoot, crap!" She let her robe fall away and pool on the floor behind her and renewed her efforts, thrashing and flinging the brightly colored fabrics. She was ironically shameless in regards to her own nudity, for all that she could work herself into hysterics over the pride she put into fashion.

He stood watching her for a moment, mostly for the sake of any spybugs or cloaked recorders installed in the nearby vicinity. Lord Simultaneous never missed the opportunity to encourage the unfriendly rumours floating around as to why he had taken on a nimwit like Renet under his direct tutelage. She would garner less attention this way, if they presumed his intentions for her were purely lecherous. His rivals on the council would be less inclined to meddle in her affairs, whether to sabotage or influence her. He gazed at her and only felt an alien rush of paternal pride. Let them underestimate her...

Then again, she was still wasting time tossing out the contents of her dresser. He sighed. She certainly did well enough on her own to encourage the notion.

"How are we doing on time?"

He tugged back the sleeve of his robe to check the first of the many digital watches he wore on that arm. "About four minutes."

"Oooh, crap-crapcrap!" She whirled away from him to renew her efforts. He fought the urge not to keep checking his watches. Finally she finally reappeared in the frame of the door.

So she hadn't bothered with tights, and wore several very bright colors instead of just one. Otherwise she looked exactly like her usual ridiculous self. He didn't see the need for making such a huge deal, but gave her ensemble an absent-minded nod of approval. "Yeah, sure. You look radiant. Now can we book it, eh?"

"Ready, Lord S.!"

He tried his best to look dubious instead of concerned as he demanded, "Are you *really* sick?"

"No." Her sniffle made his heart lurch, in spite of everything. "But I *am* having a super bad day."

"Noted. However, you've decided to be my little trooper and show up for work anyway, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

He cocked an eyebrow encouragingly. "And just how do we plan to do this?"

"By the book," she said softly, looking up through her wet lashes to flash him a glass-fragile smile. "One hundred percent, totally."

"And this book… you will be so good as to actually bring it along with you this time? Maybe even – ehh, open it up and *check it* now and then, hmm?"

She reached into a pocket sewn into the lip of her thigh-high boots, pulling out a slim silver device and flipping the display open. "It's converted into a Pee-Def!"

Third Earth tech. The work of her troublesome turtleboy shmuck, no doubt. He bit his tongue to keep from lecturing her.

Renet flipped the gadget closed with a tiny 'click'. "Time?" she asked again, knowing he would never tell her exactly.

"Less than twenty seconds."

She gave a tremulous smile, blew him a kiss, and disappeared.

He glanced down at his watch and waited.

One one-thousand.

Two one-thousand.

The stability alert flashing on the wall panel nearby dropped from amber to green.

Lord Simultaneous exhaled slowly and ticked a smile. "Good girl."

"There's no use consoling me," Mike sighed. His shell cell was open and balanced on his plastron in front of him. Sprawled out with his shell on the couch cushions and his feet propped up on the armrest, he was playing DS and talking to Gelica at the same time, multi-tasking like a champ. "My brothers are officially the biggest jerkwads of all time. Maybe not the biggest. I mean, there's Napoleon and Hitler and Saddam Hussein and the Shredder and Simon from that American Idol shit you insist on watching, right? But after all of *those*

guys… there's my brothers. Especially if they don't bring me back any lunch."

He frowned, both at what Gelica was saying and the fact that Link had just died again. "What? No, not that brother. Forget all of that. That was what, *last week?* Nah, Donnie's the one brother who's NOT on my shit list right now. He's just – I don't know. He's in trouble or something. Well, yeah, I guess he's supposed to be in there telling on the other two. But… I dunno. Something's *happened.* It's just this vibe I keep getting. Whatever's going on in there, it's nothing good."

"Donatello." Splinter gazed down at his kneeling son, his eyes wide and stricken, watching him. "Why do you hide from me? Why…?"

If the turtle had looked up in that moment, he would have seen such alarm and dismay written on his father's face. But he did not look up, and only heard the disappointment. Huddled in on himself, he tucked his mouth against the rim of his plastron, busy fighting the urge to 'pull into his shell'. Such a ridiculous urge, when they could not! And yet his body still ached to do it, every time he cried. Every time he truly cowered in mortal fear. Now, surely, he had reason for both...

The alarm. He could hear it sounding. That awful solemn tolling...

"I only want to help you. What did I swear to you last night? You can tell me anything – anything!"

He knew that awful bell. This clock, this countdown – it had become a sound of doom to him. One wrong step and it would get louder. The pace of it would climb, until it became a clamoring cacophony. Until… "No!" His eyes flashed up to his father, freshly washed with terror.

"Oh, my son…" Splinter's face beneath his whiskers was positively grey. "You've given me this look before."

"What? No!"

"Yes! I have seen this face on you. In nightmares, maybe… no! I have seen this look on your face before. I feel it!"

"No!" the terrapin gasped, recoiling from his father's grasping claws. All around him, the bells began to strike like thunder. "No, please master! No!" Don couldn't help it. He pulled in, locking his arms around himself. He was rocking now, quaking in fear.

"Do not leave us again! Wherever it is that you go. My so—"

"No, no, no…" Donatello dug his knuckles into his eyes, but it was too late.

With ice-cold certainty, he knew that time was standing still.

Leonardo dropped into the booth opposite Raph and began to pry the plastic top off his overpriced box of salad. After a moment he looked up defensively. "What?"

Raph seemed to realize that he had been staring in dismay at Leo's order. He shook his head and looked down.

Leo blew out a sigh and reached for his plastic bag of non-biodegradable cutlery. His words held the drone of a pre-composed speech. "It's my decision, Raph. You don't have to follow my ideals, or even like them. But if I—"

"I don't like it," Raph interrupted gruffly, right before stuffing his sub into his mouth and taking a huge bite. Then he continued, "Wah' know wha?"

Leo stared across the table dubiously, waiting for him to go on. After a moment it became clear that Raph wanted an answer out loud, so he quirked his lips wryly and intoned, "Go on and tell me. But I should warn you, whatever point you're about to make here, it's going to be hard for me to take it seriously."

"Yeah?" Raph's eyes flashed with new offense. "Wah zat?"

"Well," Leo explained, punctuating the word with a soft pop of cellophane before extracting his knife and fork, "there's an awful lot of sauce on your chin, for one thing."

Raph relaxed and flashed a grin. "Then lemme take care of that for ya'. Cause this is *serious,* all right?" He made a show of scrubbing his chin with the heel of his palm. This didn't really take care of the problem so much as smear it around.

Leo considered handing his brother a napkin but decided to let it slide. "Okay. So what's the problem?"

His large hands gestured emphatically. "Sciccano's triple-layer meat lovers pie! That's what I'm talkin' about. You and me! We always – " His voice cracked with true regret, right in the middle of his boisterous delivery. Then it was back to friendly, gruff-natured grumbling. "You and me useta *destroy* those things..."

Leonardo's smile softened at his unexpected sincerity. "Two or three, if we had the cash."

"Easy!" Raph agreed. "And Don and Mikey… I can't share a pizza with those clowns! They got no regularity. Always wantin' somethin' different, askin' for crazy mushrooms, or - or *alfredo sauce* …"

"You say that like it's a dirty word," Leo laughed.

"On a pizza?" Raph sneered as he hefted the meatball sub for a second bite. "Fucking should be."

"Donnie…"

A gentle hand was shaking him.

It was her perfume that finally broke through to him. "Everything's totally better now, Donnie." she was saying. He pulled out of his huddle, his face ashen. She reached to help him, but he quickly scrabbled to his feet on his own.

"Better?" he repeated. His heart was still hammering. The bells, they had just *stopped* .

"Yeah, I fixed it. No sweat."

"By yourself?" The rush of adrenaline, and perhaps standing up so quickly, had left him feeling light-headed. He didn't notice when her eyes narrowed. He was taking in her mismatched clothes, utterly confused by them. For as long as he'd known her, Renet had always been an 'every hair in its place' kind of girl. "Ren—what on earth are you *wearing?* "

She drew back a fist and punched him in the face.

It didn't really hurt, but still he staggered backwards in surprise. All at once he saw her angry, bloodshot eyes. Understanding struck him harder than any punch from her ever could. She had been crying. *Oh, no…*

"Asshole!" she huffed, rubbing her fist bitterly.

"Last night," he realized slowly. "You were listening in on us."

"Like I had a CHOICE, right? Cause you have such a *killer* track record when it comes to little these heart-to-hearts with Splinter. Oooh… Donnie, I cannot even LOOK at you right now! We have won the right to reset. You can take back up to thirty-two seconds. You have ten minutes to prepare for re-entry, it had better be flawless, and if you have anything else to say to me you can just talk to the hand because I am SO GONE!"

Donatello didn't dare dismantle what little calm he had mustered by trying to apologize now. "You know I won't need that much time," he

called after her, shame-faced.

It was true.

"It's just so embarrassing," he was explaining softly, precisely four minutes later – or twenty-two seconds ago, depending on the clock.

"I only want to help you. What did I swear to you last night? You can tell me anything – anything!"

"Father. You felt it, when I came back just now. Didn't you?" He looked up at Splinter earnestly through a fresh blur of tears. "I've always figured… that you could probably feel it."

"Yes," Splinter faltered. "I felt – something. Though I have never been certain. Never enough to speak of it."

"Well, now I'm telling you. Okay? You can be certain," he explained, speaking carefully. "Whatever you were feeling, you were probably right! I *have* been leaving." Like always, he wanted desperately not to lie. Every word was technically true. "Not just at night. At the most random times, and I haven't told anyone. I'm so sorry, father. Even just a moment ago, right in the middle of our counsel - I had to leave. I had no choice. I had to speak with Ren."

"And – you know, the more I think about it, they're right. Everything they've been saying about me – everything they're going to say. Being smart doesn't necessarily make me a good teacher, sensei. It's too much pressure. I'm not assertive by nature, and whenever I try to be, I only come off as nagging and petulant. I've been so distracted, throughout the whole lesson. I have NOT fulfilled my duty to you, and I'm no longer sure that I can! The more I'm made to try, the more seriously I doubt my ability to teach them anything. Especially not whatever it is I am supposed to have learned, from – from my so-called *experience…* " All of this, at least, he could say in a low voice of passion. Truer words were never spoken.

But Splinter cut him off with a shake of his head. "Donatello. *Why* did you leave our counsel? *What happened?* "

"Oh." Donatello's shoulders slunk back a little. After a moment's delay, he responded, "Renet overheard my whole 'girlfriend' dilemma. And now she's solving that problem for me by, you know - breaking up with me."

True enough, anyway, he thought sadly, looking down at the floor.

New Deal

Chapter 13 - New Deal

The shell cell tucked in Raphael's belt holster made that *noise* again. Not his normal ring, but a short annoying 'bloop'!

Raph still wasn't used to texts. Hated them, actually. He had no idea where to even find the settings for texts in their current model of shell cell. But if he ever did find the right menu, Raph seriously hoped there would be some toggle option that would let him turn them off completely.

"It's probably just Mike again," Raphael said, taking the phone out and hesitating. Michelangelo was the only one in the family who still bothered trying to text him. Mike *loved* texting. His thumb typing was even faster than Donatello's these days. And that was some feat, Raph felt, considering that it was Don who designed the keypad.

Not to mention the phone's casing, the motherboard and processor inside it, and most of the software it was running… *Hell, these days he's probably even hacking into some satellite in space to broadcast our shell cell signals...* The legality of the whole shell cell thing had begun to smell fishy to Raph ever since he discovered that for years they had been duping the big money phone carriers into piggy-backing their calls under the false assumption that the lair's switch was really some harmless Podunk pay-as-you-go service. Don sure did get squirrelly any time he poked his nose too closely into the matter or started asking questions.

But far more than any shady legal ramifications, Raphael was concerned that they had all become spoiled by the service. It cost too much, and had been built way out of proportion with their actual needs. It made him especially furious whenever he thought about Mikey who had been working all those long hours for so little reward,

and dutifully handing over every other paycheck for 'family expenses'. Meanwhile Donnie was wasting hundreds of dollars every month on something as stupid as an underground phone service with a bunch of fancy extras! Was it really so bad, back in the days when their shell cells were just long range walkie-talkies? Didn't they get by? Raphael had tried to argue this point with his family several times now, but he wasn't the best public speaker to say the least. He never seemed to get very far before being cut off and lectured about the shell cell's many wonderful benefits. No one ever wanted to hear him out... and if they did listen, so far no one had agreed with him.

"Answer it," Leo finally demanded after the third 'bloop'.

"You don't answer texts, Leo," Raph grumped. He was making what felt like a very generous effort not to rub it in any more than that as he went on to explain, "That's all there is to it. Just some words on the screen there."

"I know what a text is," Leo returned somewhat tartly, slinking back in his chair. "I just haven't memorized your sounds."

Uh-huh , Raph thought, keeping his head down to hide an his involuntary smirk. It seemed pretty safe to assume that his sounds were the default ones. He did not know how to navigate the stupid and incomprehensible menu system, and therefore had no hope of ever changing them. Also, Donatello had always adhered to a strictly "function over form" mentality when it came to his inventions. He did find regular reasons to upgrade their shell cells, but always for dull reasons like improving the memory usage. He did recently change the look of the small and numerous softkeys on the main screen, making them even smaller for the insane purpose of adding even more of them. But beyond something like that, Donatello rarely bothered to make superficial cosmetic changes. So coming up with a bunch of new and improved notification sounds did not seem like something he would ever be concerned about - at least, not without a whole lot of encouragement (i.e. pestering) from an outside source (i.e. Michelangelo).

Raphael gave serious thought to pointing out all of this. But because he was being such a decent guy and all, he kept his thoughts to himself.

Clearly the real issue here was that his big brother still had a lot of catching up to do with technology since his recent return from the jungle. Leo might be taking great pains to learn the new PC Don had built for him, but these newer shell cells were clearly still a total mystery. He'd noticed that Leo was still clinging to his long range travel model. It had been built for durability, meant to survive extreme changes in climate. It had ridiculously good battery life but hardly any features. 'No need to fix what isn't broken, right?" he once heard Leo telling Don with fake, dorky cheer. "I took really good care of it!" And while that was probably true, Raph knew that Leonardo was even more of a shell cell newbie than he was, and just unwilling to admit it.

"So what's it say?" Leo was eyeing the phone now like it was just a matter of seconds before he would attempt to wrestle it away from him. "Did you bother to read it?"

Raphael didn't elaborate at first. He dragged his cup nearer to slurp noisily at what was left of his soda, casual and slow, just to see if Leo would lose it. When his brother failed to spontaneously combust, Raph rewarded him with a shrug and admitted, "It's nothing, okay? Says we're both cum-gargling fucknuggets."

Leo scowled at the language and stabbed at a limp piece of spinach. "No, seriously. What's it say?"

Raphael leveled a very dry look at him. Then he flipped open the phone and propped his elbow on the table between them, holding up the LCD screen so that Leo could behold the proof with his own eyes.

It said:

U R CUM GARGLING FUCKNUGZ

BOTH OF U

SRSLY.

"Donatello," Splinter sighed softly, closing his eyes and reaching for his son's hands. "I have not yet been much use to you. And what small fatherly efforts I have made only caused harm to your relationship." His hands were steady and strong of grip in spite of his age, still capable and even deadly in combat. But as he clasped them around the much larger, thick-fingered hands of his son, they seemed spindly and fragile in comparison. "My bright son, please forgive me."

"Of course I forgive you," Don said softly. "Between you and I, *sensei* ... forgiveness will always be the default. But-"

Splinter said nothing, but looked on with a growing sense of helplessness as his son tried to go on. Struggling with his words, fighting the physical urge to curl - it broke his heart clean in half to watch him like this.

"Still, you shouldn't... I." He spoke in little more than a rasp. "I'm not – *b-bright* , master. Not always."

"You misread my compliments," Splinter said with a frown of open concern. Longing to look into his son's face, he reached out and gently commanded it by cupping the turtle's wet and shuddering chin in his hand. "You mistake my admiration for - requirement. I make *no such* requirement of you! Please hear me, for I will always love you! You place these expectations on *yourself* , Donatello."

"I - I know that," the turtle said, shrinking away from his hand. "Believe me, I know!"

Splinter released him quickly, feeling a swift stab of apology. He knew his direct focus was at least partly to blame for that cringing reaction, though he'd only meant to impress his point. He felt

desperate to reach through that mysterious pain every time he uncovered it, usually with words of comfort or promises of his enduring love. But in rarer moments, it was all Splinter could do not to seize the boy and rattle him back and forth, or somehow brow-beat him into a full confession.

This was not one of those moments. Donatello's face was crushed with such humiliation that Splinter could not stand the thought of embarrassing him a moment longer. He clicked his tongue against the back of his long front teeth in sympathy. Dropping onto his knees, he swept his arms around the turtle's shoulders and tucked his whiskered chin gingerly over the top of his head. "Hsshh…"

Donatello seemed to burn with further embarrassment at first, probably thinking himself much too grown up for involuntary hugging. But eventually he seemed to accept his fate and settled into the embrace. Perhaps he came to realize the new privacy this position offered - an opportunity with which to compose himself. Splinter knew these considerations would soothe the turtle far better than anything else he could offer right now.

"Are we – am I supposed to meditate now?" Donatello asked, muffled "Silence my mind or something?" His tone made it clear that he didn't want to. Splinter thought he understood the turtle's reluctance. Of all his sons, he suspected that Donatello had the most difficulty when it came to quieting that ever-turning mind of his.

"Perhaps, instead, let us appreciate this silence as time to think," the rat replied kindly. "Sometimes that is all it takes…yes?"

He kept his eyes closed, one long deft fingernail dragging over the whorled grooves and sharp green-black ridges of his carapace. It became an almost silent lullaby of tick-klik-tick-klik-ticks drumming between them, felt more than heard.

"Time to think. Time to quiet the clamor of unruly emotions. Often, then, I find a situation is not so dire as I had thought. Not quite the

disaster it seemed… And you are not so alone, hmm? I suspect that we are bright enough, this time. A solution is not beyond us."

Splinter let go of his remaining good posture and slumped with the young turtle for a time. Donatello shifted to press the side of his head against his master's red satin robe and gaze off across the room. Splinter's soft finger pads stroked his domed head. Several minutes ticked by.

"Uh," Donatello stirred and broke the silence eventually, sounding sheepish. "Sorry."

"For what, my son?"

"I got snot on your robe."

"Ah," Splinter chuckled, glancing down. "Well, I suspect that this robe has seen worse. I will do the laundry later."

"Want me to do it?" the turtle suddenly offered, his grey-brown eyes flashing up hopefully. "I could do the laundry. I'll do it for a whole month! Make that three months!"

"Mm," Splinter glanced down the length of his nose shrewdly. "You would do laundry instead of return to the lesson. This is your solution?"

Donatello stared for a moment and then made an abrupt and desperate attempt to impersonate the tiny, wobbly, ridiculous smile that Michelangelo plastered onto his face whenever he most needed sympathy.

The effect was so unexpectedly adorable that Splinter found he was increasingly defenseless against it. Frowning, the rat glanced away from his son quickly and countered, "You choose a very poor bribe!"

"Six months?" the desperate turtle amended. "A *year?* I don't know, *sensei* . I'm not saying it's off the table, but a year of punishment

really sounds excessive to me. You know, all things considered."

"Donatello!"

"What?"

"How can you be so good at math, yet so *terrible* at bartering?"

"Oh, am I?" Sarcasm crept into his voice now, with just a touch of arrogance. "Gosh, then I guess it's a good thing I'm pursuing a career as a ninja turtle instead of - of running booths at flea market, or swapping livestock!" He sulked in silence for a moment, then abruptly demanded (as if slightly annoyed, but persistently curious about any newly discovered shortcomings), "Fine. Tell me what was so wrong about it?"

Giving him a small and clever smile, Splinter explained patiently, "I *love* to do laundry."

Donatello brightened immediately. "Oh! Then, I'll vacuum all the rugs instead. Scrub the floors in the dojo. I'll retile the whole kitchen, upgrade the major appliances!" His hands parted with appeal, and began to look dismayed when Splinter gave him no immediate reply. "Look, if you're holding out to hear me say 'the dishes'... well, that's right out. I'm sorry, but I *hate* that job and already do more than my fair share of it. Also I'm pretty fed up with any kind of dusting. But if there's any other chore in the house that you would rather have me do, just name it! I am your handy-turtle. For six whole months, I'll do whatever you want!"

"Bah! Still terrible!" The rat gave him a slow, disapproving head-shake. "Why would you offer me so much, so early?"

"Why?" His expression froze, speechless and incredulous before he finally spluttered, "Because I REALLY do not wish to go on teaching sex ed to my brothers, *sensei* !"

"I could do *anything* with such a promise," Splinter pointed out slowly, lobbing the question more to stall for time than anything. "Make you do terrible things! I could put you in charge of – scrubbing the sinks and toilets! All the floors around them! I could banish you to that dungeon which is Michelangelo's bedroom, whereupon you might never to return! I could put you in charge of cleaning George!"

"YES! DONE! Wait. George?" Donatello's face rumpled with immediate confusion and disgust at the thought of having to clean whomever his imagination was conjuring. "Master Splinter? Gosh, I'm kind of scared to ask now. But who in the world is *George?* "

"Raphael's grill," the elder rat supplied, blinking in mild surprise. Surely Donatello had heard his brothers refer to it as such before.

The truth was, Splinter was not sure why Raphael had thought to give a name to this particular appliance. Why not, for example, the blender or the toaster oven? It had never seemed important or even significant. He was an elderly father to four teenage boys, and being baffled by their word choice nothing new to him. Honestly, he had supposed that the pet name had been derived from Raphael's natural affection for any device that would squeeze out the least healthy parts of the meat upon which his carnivorous appetite so depended.

"It grills the hamburgers and chicken," he elaborated helpfully when Donatello continued to stare back at him in blank non-recognition.

"Oh! The George F—" Comprehension lit up his face, followed by the flashing of a quick and insincere smile. "Right! Of *course.* You mean that sticky, black, *grease-caked atrocity* that sits right on top of the counter where the rest of us must also our prepare food. The thing that's always filling up those little plastic troughs of pure, disgusting fat with charred little bits of ash and chunks of old, burnt meat floating around in there... And then it cools and gets hard to becomes this – this horrible boomerang-shaped block of solid fat, which is inevitably left on the edge of the sink for me to find every time it's my turn to do the dishes, like the most nasty, least sanitary bar of

homemade soap the world has ever conceived!" He made a face. "*That's* the grill you want me to clean?"

"George," Splinter agreed, breaking into a smile.

"George the grill."

"For the next… six months, it was said?"

"Ugh. You weren't kidding, *sensei* ," Donatello groaned. "I really DO need to work on my haggling skills. That's a million times worse than six months of doing the dishes! But… yes, fine!" Both of his palms flashed up in defeat. "If that's the new deal on the table, then I'll honor it. For six whole months! George the Grill will be spic and span. Sounds fantastic, actually. I'm going to revolutionize the whole… grill cleansing process… going on up there. Can't wait to get started."

The rat's tail lashed as he studied his son, giving him ample time to crumble or beg for an alternative. The turtle kept his gaze trained stubbornly on the floor in front of him, looking quite serious and unwavering.

"Very well," Splinter said at last, with grave finality. "Donatello, I release you from your previous promise. But. You are *not* released from attending the upcoming lesson entirely. Understood? Now, go. Collect the outline you have been working from, along with any diagrams you have prepared, or visual demonstrations. Bring me any relevant books on your shelves, and any relevant notes on - the topics we shall be discussing."

"Uh," Donatello faltered, shifting his weight in preparation to rise. "You mean, right now?"

"Yes!" Splinter agreed, making a shooing gesture at him. "Right now! Bring everything you have to me. And be warned that I may still depend on you for assistance at times. But – yes. Gather the others.

Tell them that from this point forward, we will be learning this material together."

Donatello seemed to think better of whatever protest had sprung onto his face in response to these words. He gulped and rose to his feet to give Splinter a quick bow before he fled the room to obey the new orders.

Master Splinter swore into his beard after his son had departed. Reaching for his cane, the conflicted father felt the hard weight of his years as he took to his feet. "Yes. We will do this as it should have been done from the very beginning."

"What's up, Mikey!"

Michelangelo screamed like a girl, but only until the sound of his own name registered. Then he clamped his mouth shut and stared with huge, dumb-founded eyes at the buxom blonde who was now sitting on him.

"It's me!" the intruder supplied in a bright and helpful tone.

"Umm..." The turtle swallowed and continued to regard her with an inarticulate, bug-eyed stare.

There had been a loud ripping sound when she first arrived, though of course he had originally attributed this to the cosmic hole in the universe which had opened up and dumped her right on top of him. Now that he'd had time to take in a little more of her, Mike could see that what he had actually heard had been a dress malfunction. She had appeared with her strong thighs wrapped around his plastron, and apparently the shiny blue mini-dress she was wearing had not completely survived the maneuver.

"Umm, yourself! Oh, stop bugging out, already. It's *me!* Your bestest time-traveling chica in the whole multiverse, and I really super duper need your – oh, fuck me!" Renet had followed his gaze and finally

noticed the damage to her awesomely slutty get-up. "Again, seriously? Damnit, that's like the third time… you see? *This* is why I switched to wearing a body-suit!"

"What the hell?" Gelly was saying on the other end of the phone line, but Mike barely heard her. He was much too distracted by the growing what-the-fuckness taking place in his living room. "Are you still there, Mike?" she called after a moment. "Hey, was that an actual girl in the background, or were you just doing more of your weird voices?"

"What's up, Renet!" he managed to grunt. Mike hoped his reply would serve him dually, greeting his sudden visitor and explaining some of the what-the-fuckness to Gelly in one fell swoop. "Wow, uh. Look. I sort of feel obliged to mention this. Like, mostly because my very strong and macho sense of honor demands it. But. You should know that I can totally see your panties. They are see-through and pretty awesome. But these observations are a one hundred percent accident on my part. So, before things get *really* awkward, maybe…"

"Oh my god," Gelica groaned on the other end of the line. "Mike? Please tell me this conversation did not just become a crackhead attempt to phone sex with me."

"What? No! It's like, Renet's *really* here. And she totally did this Houdini appearance right on my chest and ripped her clothes and – okay, get off me for a second!"

Renet gave him several confused blinks before she began to clamber off of him. But she only got about half-way before she stopped and gave him an even more desperate look. "But – wait! Mike, listen to me. The thing is, I don't have a whole lot of time, and I really – mph!"

Mike got up, effectively dumping her onto the couch in front of him. "Look, you see this? You were sitting on my DS!"

Renet stared up at him, stunned and aghast at the ungentlemanly treatment.

"C'mon, Gelly! I've told you all about Renet. She's that magical time traveling girl, the one who shows up every three years or so and says she desperately needs our help? And it always turns out to be some kind of bullshit homework assignment that she's suckering us into doing for her so she can skip off to make the honor roll and get all the credit. Meanwhile, my brothers and I always get stuck in another time facing horrible dangers that nearly get us all killed. Any of this ringing a bell...?"

"Oh, right…" Gelica recalled sardonically. "You mean that magical time traveling girl who got everybody trapped in the land of dinosaurs. And spent most of that time making jewelry out of seashells and running around in home-made leopard-skin bikinis."

"Uh, yeah? How many friends who are magical time traveling girls do you think I got, woman? And for the record, it was saber-tooth tiger skins."

"Look, you tell a lot of bullshit stories, Mikey. No disrespect, but - yeah, that kind of sounds like one of them."

"Yeah, well, believe me or don't believe me. The point is, she's back. And about a year and a half early, too. Fuck, would you look at this? It won't even start up now."

"Try taking the battery out and putting it back in again," his friend suggested. "It worked for Ton-Ton once when his DS got sat on."

"Mike!" Renet brought her fists down on the couch cushion in front of her. She did not look happy at being ignored.

"You're going to have to hang on a second." He pinched the phone to his cheek with one shoulder, struggling with the hand-held game for a moment before complaining, "It's no good. This battery is not going anywhere. There's a really tiny screw in the way."

"Oh yeah. Shit. Now that I think about it, we did have to find one of those little tiny screwdrivers. You know, they come with eyeglasses?"

"No one in my family wears eyeglasses, Gelly!" Mike cried with growing dismay. "Our vision is like wicked good compared to humans!"

"Alright, ENOUGH!" Renet leapt up indignantly and stood over him, fists clenched at her sides. "I do NOT have time for this! Now you… *give me that!* " She swiped the phone away from him and brought it up to her face. "Hello? Well, hi there! Is this is Angel? Oh, I really can't be expected to keep track, sweetie. But I remember you. You're that fashion-forward little darling with the crazy pigtails. Kind of a rebel? Unemployed, six weeks preggers, still on the run...? Independence can be really groovy and all, but maybe it's time to stop kidding yourself. Because let's face it, you're really not doing so hot on your own so far. You know what I'm saying, honey? It's like, maybe all those government people looking for you really DO know what's best."

"She's *what?* " Mike was thunderstruck. The Nintendo DS fell right out of his hands and onto the floor, but he did not even seem to notice.

He could barely make out the sound of her shaken reply coming distantly from his shell cell. "How… how the fuck do you know me, lady?"

" *I just do* ," Renet said in a low, dangerous voice. Then she cleared her throat and abruptly regained a closer semblance to her annoying sing-song. "And I would *totally* be asking you the same thing right now? Except that I already know the answer. It's because these Hamato turtles simply cannot keep a lousy secret to save their god damned lives! I mean, they are *seriously incapable, haha!* Now, I'm *really* sorry for being such a bitch to you. But I have no time left for this bullshit. So, what I need you to do is hang up this phone, and then in just a little bit, you can call him back. Let's say, five minutes.

Or… shit. Three and a half? Okay! Yeah, anytime after three and a half minutes would be great, thanks. Bye now!"

She prodded several buttons experimentally, then seemed to give up trying to disconnect the call and simply threw the phone over her shoulder. Then she readjusted her torn mini-dress, pressing her hands over the flaps to make sure they were going to stay in place before wheeling back to face Michelangelo. "So!" She beamed fiercely at him. "Where was I?"

"Well, let's see," Mike countered angrily. By now, the Time Mistress was really getting on his last nerve. "I'm pretty sure you just broke my god damned video game, and then threatened the girl of my dreams and hung up on her. God! She isn't really pregnant, is she? You just made that up so she'd flip her shit and get her off the phone quicker. Right?"

"Aww… don't worry, hon," Renet assured him in a gooey tone. "There's a *pretty* good chance it isn't yours. Now, pay attention. Because I am in, like, a major state of emergency here. And it isn't about school, kay? I've actually been done with school for some time, I'll have you know. I am a fully trained and licensed Mistress of Time!"

"Uh-huh," Mike allowed, unimpressed. "So it's not about homework anymore. You need our help so you don't get sacked. Am I right?"

"No! Well – actually, yeah. But I think you are kinda missing the point, because there are also, like, LIVES at stake. Duh, and I'm like, TOTALLY upholding peace and justice. And the thing is – ooooh! DAMNIT, Mike. There's not enough time! Now... can you please just… screw it!" Her eyes blazed and she suddenly seized him with both hands. "PLEASE SIGN MY PETITION!"

"What?" he blinked.

"PLEASE SIGN MY PETITION!" she shrieked again. Her glossy pink fingernails hurt where they were digging into his arms. "It's like, really

super important! And all it needs is one more signature. And it's got to be turned in hella soon because – well, there's this trial coming up in, like, just a couple of null-seconds! Which are luckily way longer than third earth seconds, but still not a whole lot of time!"

"Well – uh. You know, normally I would?" he stalled, scratching thoughtfully at the back of his neck and giving her a wary look. "It's just. The thing is, lately? I get this feeling like maybe you're a crazy and dangerous bitch who oughta learn to help herself for once."

"MIKEY!" She made a huffing sound, red-faced and balling her fists like she was a little girl on the verge of a tantrum. "I swear, it's for a REALLY super good cause, or I wouldn't even be asking!"

"Good cause, huh?" Mike wasn't convinced.

"YES! So can't you just stop being so - so MEAN, and - and RRGH! Why can't you just think of the children! And the rainbowforests and the whales! And all the hungry people out there who are dying and totally need you to sign it! ONLY YOU CAN SAVE THEM!"

"Hmm... well. The truth is that I am pretty down with, like, grass roots movements. Like, people banding together to damn the man and feed the homeless and fighting oppression and cervical cancer... Also, if there were such a thing as rainbowforests? I would definitely want to save them. See, the main problem is usually that I'm not registered to vote anywhere. I'm not even a legal citizen, right? And can you imagine how grounded I'd be if I put down the lair down as my contact information? Leo would NOT be happy. So what I'm saying is, while I'm all for it - you know, *hypothetically?* It's still kinda like, signing petitions is not gonna be my best option for saving the world. It's actually way more practical for us to just, you know, go out and find some aliens to fight. Or like, beat down some crazy dude with a doomsday device."

"But this isn't some stupid Earth petition! Okay, so maybe I didn't mean any of that stuff I said about saving whales or whatever. But that doesn't mean... look, I still need your help! And I'm asking

REALLY nice, and... oh, come on! Quit playing around and sign my petition!"

"Quit playing around?" he exploded. "What petition are you even talking about? How am I supposed to... I mean, you're not even holding anything!"

"Oh yeah?" Renet gave him a challenging look and held her palms out in front of her. All of a sudden, there it was: an official-looking document attached to a futuristic silver clip board, balanced on the flat of her open hand. The other was now holding a pen which she was thrusting at him. "PLEASE SIGN!"

"Okay! Alright already! If I sign this, you'll stop screaming in my face and go back to where you came from? That is all I need to hear at this point." He took the pen and the clip board from her and skimmed over the document warily. He tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his gut by reminding himself that at least signing a piece of paper was way less dangerous than all the 'little favors' she had required of them before this. "Still don't see what's so freaking important about… dusting? *Dusting?* Are you kidding me? That's what this is about?"

"Where I come from," she said gravely, "dusting happens to be a very important duty."

"Limited disclosure… fair and authorized observation… huh." Mike had begun to sign it, but stopped part-way through to cock his head at her inquisitively. "What's it mean by... the full retention of undone memories? And what are these spheres it keeps talking about?"

"Oh, you know how petitions are! It's all a bunch of boring lawyer talk. Please hurry up and sign it, okay?"

"All right, whatever..." he grumbled, putting his pen to the page again. "Signing, see? Hey, stop squirming. It's very distracting. And it's not my fault for having a weirdly long name. So just, keep your see-through panties on."

"Done?" she cried, snatching the paper away from him the moment he'd finished. "Yes! This will do! Thank you SO much! It's – oh! Wow, it's already disappearing? I think they must have already – huh! But, so soon? Lord S. must be pulling strings for us…Well, whatever. The important thing is, it's out of my hands."

"Uh, great. I'm assuming. So… yeah. Glad to be of service. What are friends for, right?" He folded his arms and looked at her expectantly. "Now, aren't you forgetting something?"

"I dunno," she admitted, "Probably. I mean... am I?" The Time Mistress dragged her gaze up from the now-blank piece of paper and blinked stupidly at him. "Look, there's no danger or surprise time traveling adventures this time. I really did just need you to sign something."

Michelangelo sighed in exasperation and stooped to pick his non-functional game up off the floor. "Remember this? Look, before you take off, I think it would be a really nice gesture if you would please poof a new DS into existence for me. And while you're at it, a new Zelda game. Just in case that got damaged too. You know, it doesn't even have to look exactly the same as my old one. Cause I'm not even sure they even sell this model anymore. So, if you want to replace it with a newer one, that is ok by me. It also doesn't have to be black. They're making them in red and navy blue now. So if I had to choose, I would probably have to go with red. Did you know that the newest ones have a built-in camera? It's kind of gimmicky, I guess. There's not even many games out that let you do anything with it. But I hear some are scheduled to release next year, so I wouldn't mind if it came with a camera. If nothing else, I could find ways to traumatize Raph with it..."

He paused to notice that Renet had still not produced a new hand-held game from thin air. She was also not taking any notes to help her remember the preferred specifications for his replacement. Actually, she was looking at him like he was a psychopath.

"Okay. Well, look. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself here. I didn't realize that pulling a new one out of thin air might be too much trouble for you. You know, since I saw what you did with the clip board and all. But, whatever. Hey, I've got an even better idea. This will probably be a whole lot easier. Instead, why don't you go back in time real quick, right? And just, like, redo your whole entrance! This way, you can make it so you don't squash it in the first place. And then, at the *same time* - this part is way cool, are you ready for it? At the same time, you can figure out a LESS whorish way to land when you drop out of the sky! That way, you avoid ripping your dress completely! Fucking A, right? Everybody wins! Personally, I recommend this ugly but exceptionally comfy overstuffed arm chair." He made a hopeful Vanna White gesture, presenting her with the piece of furniture he had in mind. "See, cause I've had to crash land on this thing a couple of times myself, already. And it has never failed me so far, let me tell you. So, there you go. Dress all in one piece, pre-tested arm chair landing - sounds pretty amazing, right? What do you say?"

She gave him several more slow blinks before tossing her head dismissively. "Nope. No can do, Mikey. I mean, I could, but I'd be sacked for sure. Hey, it will be fine, though! Go ask Don to fix it. I've seen him fix WAY more complicated things than your little thingy there."

"What a great idea. Yeah, thank you so very much," he scowled. "Clearly you have not heard Don's famous lecture about fixing what he calls 'non-essential recreational electronics'. Because he actually wrote up this whole stupid list of them, right? And if what you broke is on the list, then it means you better start sucking up to him bigtime because the thing is not a priority, and might never get fixed until he decides to take pity on you or wants to use the thing you broke himself."

"Aww," Renet made a pouty face at Mike that did not look genuinely sympathetic to his plight. "Poor you! But really, sucking up to people

isn't so bad. It's actually a way important skill to have in life! So maybe this will be, like, a valuable learning experience for you."

"Argh!" Mike made a frustrated appeal to the ceiling, then tried a new tactic. "Donnie is gonna be stuck in there with Master Splinter for who knows how many hours! What the hell am I supposed to do about it until then, huh?"

She looked dubious at this, and glanced at one of the pocket watches dangling from her outfit before correcting him. "Try... like, thirty-five seconds, honey. Give or take. Whoo, and that means I am cutting it CLOSE, yikes! Heh, gotta go! Thanks bunches! You're a REAL life saver, Mikey." A shimmering hole opened up in the fabric of reality. She stepped through it and turned to look back at him through the shrinking portal of light. He could make out her curvy silhouette against the blaze of fractured light pouring out from behind her and spilling rainbows in all directions onto the floor and other mundane surfaces of his living room. "And have lots of fun at orientation, kay? Bye now!"

And then she was gone.

"Right!" he hollered after her. "You bet! Whatever that's supposed to mean! But hey, thanks for dropping by! Always so nice to have you! You crazy douche-faced hoebag! Rrrrrghh!" Michelangelo kicked the comfy overstuffed chair ineffectually. By this point there was no trace that she had been there at all.

Several deep breaths later, Mike tried to reassure himself with the obvious fact that she was batshit crazy. Renet, he reasoned, was not a reliable authority figure when it came to - well, anything! Therefore, it was very unlikely that Gelica was pregnant.

She would have told me, for one thing. Why on earth wouldn't she? God, maybe she hadn't known yet, herself. He debated with himself over whether or not he should call her back and ask her about it. It seemed kind of clingy though, especially when there was a good

chance she would be calling back herself in just three and a half minutes.

He couldn't put the matter out of his head, though. He kept wondering, *What will it mean for her if it's true? What will it mean for the baby?*

"Mikey?"

He started and looked up to see Donatello eying him from the arched mouth of the hallway. Michelangelo's eyes widened. His gaze snapped towards the digital clock hanging on the wall nearby. *Right on time,* he thought. *That is way creepy* !

"Are you okay, Mike? Who were you just talking to?"

The clock changed right before his eyes. Right as he was staring at it!

N0: 1 !

"What!" he squeaked. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The digital read-out was back to normal. **11:01 AM.** He blinked at Donatello. "Sorry?"

"I'm pretty sure I heard you talking to someone."

"I…" Mike swallowed. He felt cold all over and his skin was crawling. He felt like he'd just seen a ghost.

A wild glance around the room quickly changed his mind. Seeing a ghost would be a definite improvement on his current situation. If there were a ghost in the room, he would have a readily available scapegoat on which to blame all of the super weirdness that was happening. As it was, Mike was left to feel like he must be losing his mind.

More messages were screaming at him from every digital read out his eyes landed upon - there, on the cable box, and on the front of

the DVD player, and glaring at him from the slanted screens of arcade games and hijacking the marquis attached to their antique pinball machine, which had never displayed anything except for high scores. **DO NOT TELL DO NOT TELL DO NOT** , the scrolling letters suggested.

Scariest of all was familiar face of his beloved TV screen. Two ominous words were repeated over and over again, a constant string of bold white letters that were scrolling downwards and slowly filling the screen:

NO ONE NO ONE NO ONE NO ONE NO ONE NO ONE NO ONE

"No one!" he finally squeaked, going from spooked to paralyzed with terror. Mike covered his eyes in an attempt to block out the messages, and wailed in a louder voice than he had intended to use, "IT WAS NO ONE! No one, ok? No one at all!"

"Ri- ight," the other turtle frowned, making his disbelief crystal clear. He gave the room a brisk, circumnavigating glance, then looked back to Mike with a long-suffering sigh. "By the way… you seem to have dropped your phone. Or rather, you seem to have chucked it over there onto the floor carelessly. Won't you please go pick it up before someone steps on it, and then maybe try to wrap up whatever conversation you were just not having with that girl as quickly as possible? After that, I need you to round up the others and let them know that class will be resuming shortly." He didn't wait for Mike to agree with any of it, but began moving past him and heading for the stairs.

"Shortly?" Mike echoed. He trailed after Don for several clumsy steps, still in a daze from the spooky messages. "Don, wait! How soon is shortly?"

Donatello paused half-way up the stairs to give Mike an exhausted look over one shoulder. "I don't know. Five minutes? Probably less?

Look, just make sure nobody goes anywhere."

"Uh, you bet!" Mike called after him, feeling his panic begin to rise again. "They shall not pass! Well, maybe they can pass. So long as it's just to go to the bathroom, or get a snack from the fridge or something. But they shall not pass to go any other places! And really, who would wanna? I mean, with all of this fun and excitement going on, who would possibly-?"

He managed to clamp his lips together before any more incessant babbling could escape them. Luckily Donatello had already seen fit to ignore his maniacal ravings. His brother was clearly hell-bent on reaching his room post haste.

Michelangelo knew that the best thing to do was to keep his cool, at least until Don was out of sight. He listened, tracking his brother's progress on the landing above. His wandering gaze happened to fall on the TV again as he waited. Bad move.

NO EMMY 4 U , it chided him. The words appeared only once, sliding down the center of the screen briefly before dropping out of sight.

Then the message was gone, and that prickly feeling was back on his skin with a vengeance. The power indicator on the television was dark instead of green, indicating that it was not even turned on. Maximum creepy factor had been achieved for sure. Mike continued to eyeball the television, and occasionally whipped his head around trying to catch the other clocks or electronics read-outs being chatty when he wasn't looking. Nothing in the living room seemed to be possessed any longer, not that there was any real way to be sure.

But then he heard the sound he had been waiting for – a soft metal 'snick' that was Donatello's metal doors sealing shut on the upper landing just above him. There was no time to dwell on any of it - there was no time to hate on the crazy game-squashing hoebag, or wonder if Gelly was knocked up, or freak out about the Twilight Zone formerly known as his living room.

Five minutes, Don had said. Probably less! Either way, it was not a lot of time.

But even though his brothers were probably going to get busted no matter what - even though they were still cum-gargling fucknuggets and jerks of the highest order - none of that really mattered. They were automatically his priority, and always would be. There wasn't a lot of time left, but there was still a chance - so of course it was his sacred duty to warn them!

Michelangelo bolted for his shell cell, determined not to waste another moment.

Reasons to Panic

Chapter 14 - Reasons to Panic

Several minutes earlier...

"So what's the plan, Leo?" Raphael wondered as he pushed open the door for both of them.

"The plan," Leo repeated absently. Most of his attention was focused on the contents of the two bags he was juggling. "Well, I tend to have several going at any given time. Which one did you want to discuss?"

"The plan, for when we go in there! It's like you said. We gotta stay a unified front, right?" Raph looked over and scowled. "Will you stop fussing with that, already?" He snagged one of the bags from Leo and stuffed it under his arm, grumbling, "These guys are not gonna fuck up the order."

"They did, actually."

"What?" Raphael's grey-green face wrinkled with disbelief. He grabbed the receipt from Leo as his brother was still reading it. "Let me see that." He studied the total and almost immediately scoffed, "Looks right to me. That's about how much I tipped for."

"One, that was a twenty-five percent tip you left. Two, there is a lot more food in that bag than what showed up on the bill."

Raphael groaned, putting his face towards the sky briefly. "Why don't you just say something, if you got something to say? Do you have to *count* at me?"

"Sorry," Leonardo said, casting a slightly embarrassed glance towards his brother. Then he faced forward again, purposeful and

back to business. "That cashier girl *knew* you, Raph. She *knew* you, but she was trying not to let on that she did."

That made him scowl. "She barely looked at me!"

"But she was paying attention. And you're right, actually. She spent a whole lot *more* time covertly studying me. Why is that?"

Raphael barked a short, raucous laugh. "You gotta stop bein' so paranoid, Leo. Maybe she thought you were some kinda hot lookin' dude under that trench coat. Did you ever think about that?"

"Why didn't she wonder about you, then? We're dressed almost exactly the same."

"Maybe you pull it off better! These trench coats - they don't flatter my figure, see?"

"That's ridiculous!"

"I can't help it, Leo. I'm big-boned!"

"You *really* expect me to believe that?" the older turtle deadpanned.

"That I'm big-boned? Yeah!" Raph stuck his elbows out and made Hulk shoulders at Leonardo to demonstrate. "Hurrr!"

"No," Leonardo corrected slowly, refusing to acknowledge the showboating. "I mean, do you really expect me to believe that young woman was mistaking me for a hot dude?"

Raphael's shoulders deflated. "No," he grunted, on the verge of open laughter.

"Of course not. So, just admit it. You have broken the rule of stealth with her, haven't you? And Michelangelo is in on it too. I've heard him talk about this place like it was the greatest. But it's not about the food at all, is it?"

This caused the hothead to puff up again. He turned towards Leo and stuck a finger in his face. "Hey. The food is *awesome* ."

"But there's more to it," Leonardo countered steadily. "Isn't there?"

The two turtles had stopped walking. A weighted silence fell between them as they stood facing off with one another in front of a vacant shop front. Leo beat back the fires of his panic as the pressure seemed to build between them. *Please just be honest with me* , he wanted to scream, but he was scared to death of sounding petulant at a time like this.

Raphael's eyes shuttered and fell to the sidewalk between them. It was obvious that he was struggling with some conflict of loyalties, or maybe just terrified of heart-to-heart moments as a general principal. But in the end, he did not let Leo down. "Yeah," he finally said. He paused to give a slow exhale. "Mike is gonna take it real hard, if we have to stop coming. But I've actually wanted to - I tried to say something back there, even. I just thought-"

"You have been trying to tell me," Leonardo realized aloud. "Otherwise you wouldn't have asked me to come here in the first place."

"Somethin' like that," Raphael agreed, keeping his gaze fixed on the ground.

"And you were afraid I would ask you both to stop coming," the older brother interjected quietly. "But I'm not, okay?"

Now Raph lifted his gaze and looked at Leo, his eyes wide. "We thought – maybe because we all took that oath. Stick to the shadows —"

"That oath has been broken a lot lately, hasn't it?" the other turtle's mouth ticked at one corner. "By every single one of us." He started walking again, heading for the alley where they would descend into the sewers. "You think that no one ever saw me in Madagascar or

Japan? Central America? Tell me, do you think it's easier to live in total secrecy or among people who worship you as an avenging nature spirit or a minor god?"

"I can imagine," Raphael agreed, still wide eyed. "Whole villages huh?"

Leonardo shrugged and flushed with shame. "Maybe we've reached an age where we can use our best judgment. We should be wise enough to make that choice. The choice... whether to withhold our trust, or give it. Don't you think?"

A wash of gratitude left Raph at a loss for words. Wrinkles grew around his eyes and he nodded.

"And I *would* like to trust you. You and this pretty waitress." Raph's mouth opened to protest and Leo grinned, trying to show that he was teasing. "I guess you're into all that nose jewelry."

"Me and Darcy?" Raph snickered. "Not a chance. She's got a girlfriend!"

Raph and Mike had made friends with a lesbian! A tiny firecracker of hope went off in Leonardo's chest at the news. He was careful to keep his thoughts off his face, but a voice in the back of his head was suggesting, *There. You hear that? You could probably tell either of them, and it would be fine! That's as close as you'll ever get to proof.*

Leo gave up smothering his grin and deftly changed the subject. "Hold this." He shoved the carryout bag into Raphael's hands. They'd reached the manhole cover and now he hefted the cold slab of metal out of the street like it was nothing. Raph made a one-handed descent down the rungs rather than leaping to the half flooded level of sewers below, for the sake of the food.

After fitting the manhole cover back into place and leaping to the ground himself, Raph's shell cell startled them both with a 'bloop!'

The text alert sounded strange, much louder than before now that it was bouncing off curved concrete walls in the relative silence. Leonardo pulled it off his belt in a hurry and the display clicked on as he opened it. Phosphorescent green spilled from the small LCD screen onto the curves of their faces as the brothers were both drawn to gaze at their only light source. They read Mike's latest text message together.

"Shit," Raphael whispered.

Leo took the extra carryout bag back from Raph and said, "Time to run."

Carrying a box full of diagrams and pages of typed notes, Donatello paused at the threshold of his door. With every step, a reckless and unhappy feeling had been growing in his chest and he was desperate to find release for it. It was the lack of resolution, he decided - the idea that he hadn't even said he was sorry for making her cry - which was driving him crazy. He set the box down on the nearest work bench and paced back and forth in front of door. Then his hand shot out, cranking the lever down with more force than necessary. The airlocks in the walls hissed and made a 'whumph' as the electrical sound proofing kicked in.

Once his privacy was assured, Donatello dove to recover the pendant from its hiding place. Most recently he had stashed it inside a locked server case. It was a tiny glass tear drop with an even tinier clock inside. The delicate hour and second hands pointed to Nulltime, spinning quickly in opposite directions. He held the pendant up in front of him. Rather than using it to teleport directly to her, he spoke to it. He was the kind of guy who insisted on knocking first. "Renet. We need to talk, okay?"

Don waited in silence. When he spoke again, there was more strain in his voice, "Please, Ren. I've thought about it, and I can't bear to do this. I don't want to spend another second here. Not until we've –

please just give me a chance to explain! I never meant for you to hear…"

"Give it up, Hamato," a familiar voice called with smooth, infuriating calm. "She's long gone."

The edge in Donatello's voice went dull as he recognized the voice's owner. "Hello, Jonas," he greeted slowly, turning to face the sound. Renet's androgynous duster was now occupying one of his monitors. The screen ticked and flickered as if reaching him from a long distance - which would make sense, really. They were both from the same universe and time, but different solar systems. Jonas was an Omatran, which meant he was tall and lean, with teal skin, spiky blue-black hair, and slanted alien eyes. He reminded Donatello of the creatures from the movie Avatar, except twice as pretty and clad in futuristic, skin-tight synthetic leather body armor. "What do you mean, she's gone?" he demanded.

Don had been genuinely trying to remain friends with Jonas, even after the confession that he and Renet were longtime 'playmates' who practically lived together. The pair had no intention of cooling down their affectionate relationship just because Donatello had entered the equation. All his good intentions for Renet's prettyboy apprentice fell apart as the blue alien continued, "The most I can tell you is that a certain trial didn't go as well as we'd been hoping. Now she's been asked to take a rather long vacation. But, hey, listen! Turns out you've got nothing to worry about. Completely by accident, she left you in capable hands."

"This is ridiculous." Don said through his teeth. "Not to mention *terrible news.* And she's really sending YOU to tell me, after everything we've been through? Have I been so horrible, she can't even say goodbye to my face?"

"I don't think they gave her the option. Now, listen. I'm telling you, maybe it won't be so bad. We both know she's never been a good match for you. How does that Earthling saying go? Many fish in a sea? It's just like that. You'll see. And you won't be cut off completely.

I'll swing out to Orion in my cruiser and rescue you from time to time! Show off my latest toys. You can access the Omatran DataBank all you want… I won't even drag you to any Fed clubs!"

"No," Donatello said sternly. " *Never again.* I told you, I have to clean up my act now that Leo's back!" The kind of clubs Jonas frequented were bad for his Federation credit account, not to mention his blood pressure.

"We'll do only boring and harmless things," Jonas promised.

"No bots. No jiggle shows," Don muttered under his breath. "No more tripping on weird crystals. No laws broken *whatsoever!* "

The Omatran beamed sincerely. "Cross my heart."

"I don't know," Don groaned. "Maybe? Your timing is really terrible. I mean, could you get out of here? Just for now? You are not who I need to see right now. Please tell Renet that I really need to talk to her."

"I keep telling you, mate, but you aren't listening! It *really* might be awhile. Now, there is one more thing you need to hear. I mean, you were probably expecting this. Right? But, you know, they're making me deliver the news officially. So, here goes. You're out of a job. Outside of this world, I mean. You can still fix computers for humans if you want to. Like, if you're still doing that. So - yeah. The apprenticeship has been terminated. Your access to the 79th layer of Nulltime has been suspended without a full time escort and a buttload of paperwork. Oh, and that pendant you're holding? It's probably not going to work for awhile. Not until she works some things out and can call on you herself. Or if the two of you have to go back on trial, obviously. Um. You're being awfully quiet, Hamato. Neuro-translator working all right? You understand everything I'm saying to you?"

"She had me *fired?* " Donatello was reeling from the news. Renet might as well have slugged him in the face again. "I don't believe

you," he spluttered desperately. "You're just saying this to - because you and her-" He looked down at the pendant, and that convinced him better than anything Jonas could have said. The hour and second hands were standing still for the first time. "Jonas!" he cried, tearing his gaze back to the monitor. "Tell me this isn't happening! Tell her to be reasonable, for once in her life!"

Jonas spread his hands and worked his mouth helplessly.

"Is she – do you think - it's a power play, right? She won't fill my position. She'll give me time to apologize. I'll make it up to her!"

Jonas flinched. "Hamato… I'm really sorry. Truth is, the vacancy has already been filled. Hey, maybe it's for the best! Look, I don't have much time left. I just wanted to say that I feel for you, all right? That, and I really am going to kidnap you. We'll hang out soon, you and me!"

Donatello contemplated throwing the pendant at him. However, the pendant was indestructible so it wouldn't accomplish anything other than to possibly damage his monitor. His shoulders slumped and he heard himself mumble, "Okay. Yeah." He rubbed his olive-freckled beak and grimaced. "See you then, I guess."

He stared at the empty screen for several minutes after Jonas had gone, cursing himself and wondering why he had agreed.

Author's note:

YES, Jonas is the same alien race as Starlee in Fast Forward. Gratz and cookies if you figured that one out without help from me.

Thanks in advance for not stringing me up at the first indulgence of an OC in this fic.

XOXO,

Winny

How Should I Know

Chapter 15: How Should I Know

"Coast is clear," Raphael announced, still catching his breath. "Nobody in sight... 'cept for Mike. Come on!" He thumped Leo on the arm. The two turtles descended the stairs quickly.

Mike was talking to someone on the phone. Raph didn't seem to notice, but Leo honed in on it immediately.

"Oh my god," he was saying, hunched over and rocking with gentle tension. "Oh my god, that must be - that's why you quit smoking. And that's why – holy crap." Fear flooded his face briefly as Michelangelo saw his brothers across the room. "I have to go. I'm really sorry! But I'll call you back, 'kay? Soon as I can." He snapped his phone shut and sat up on his knees, watching them approach.

"Who the shell were you talking to?" Leonardo demanded. He quickly closed the distance between them and loomed over Mike.

"Who's he always talking to, these days?" Raphael grumbled, trailing after him more casually.

"Care to share with the class?" Leo paused and turned to frown at Raph. "I'm not exactly in the loop these days."

"Shut up and I'll tell you. Okay? Even though she'll kill me." Mike swallowed hard and squeezed his eyes shut. "Angel's pregnant!"

The other two turtles stared at him.

"You don't say?" Donatello's disapproving voice floated down from above. They all whirled to see him descending the stairs. "I'll spare you some lame joke about the irony of her name, since you seem to have feelings for her."

Leo's stomach lurched as he realized that Don had already honed in on the brown paper bag in his hands.

"No one calls her that anymore," Mike growled defensively. His hands balled into fists around the shell cell and the broken Nintendo DS. "I only called her that so you'd know who I was talking about. These days, you guys don't even know her!"

"Relax, Mike. I don't care one way or the other," Donatello spoke in cool tones, never slowing his graceful decent. "And if Leo gives you any crap, just tell him it's none of his business. In return, I won't question why they're both perspiring or wonder about what they're carrying. Leo, you'll be happy to hear that I've taken your concerns into careful consideration. From this point forward, I think that privacy is a very good policy for us all."

"You got something to hide?" Raphael sneered.

Don shrugged. "You, of all people, should know what that's like."

Leonardo's brows drew in consternation. This was already way off script compared to how he had planned the confrontation. "Wait, you're *blackmailing* us?"

Don's blank gaze swiveled to look at Leo. His lips twitched briefly as if amused by the idea. "I guess I am."

Leo sucked in a calming breath and exhaled slowly. He stepped forward and held out the bag to Don. "You don't have to ask us anything. Here, this is for you."

Donatello eyed the bag warily. He took it and started to reach his hand in, only to recoil and drop the bag. "That's disgusting. Were you sick in it when you stumbled in last night?"

"What?" Leonardo's eyes widened in dismay. He shot forward and picked up the bag to inspect it. "Oh, shell. It was supposed to be

hummus and pita slices," he explained with apology. "It must have—exploded. We had to come home in a hurry. Don, I'm really sorry."

"Just forget it," Don mumbled, once again blank-faced and distant, wiping his hand off on his thigh. "I'm not hungry, anyway."

"Did you guys-?" Mike began in a tremulous voice.

"Here, Mike," Raph said. He took a foil-wrapped sub out of his brown paper bag and tossed it to him like a football.

Mike caught it easily and tentatively peeked under the wrapping. "Cheese and meatballs?" he asked, his voice choked with emotion but clearly hamming it up. "Y-you guys really DO love me!"

"Of course we do," Leo agreed, perfectly serious.

"Don't make me barf into that bag for real," Raphael teased, wadding the paper sub bag into a ball and chucking it at Leo. His brother deflected it easily with one hand. Then he came to stand behind the couch and look down at Mike more seriously. "Go call her back," He advised in a quieter voice. "Take your phone and your sub to the john with you. We'll say you're in there taking a dump or something."

Mike's eyes flickered to Leo uncertainly. Though he was squirming inside, the older turtle held his tongue. The effort he made was rewarded. Michelangelo's face broke open with relief and gratitude. "Thanks, guys," he said in a hush before bolting from the room.

Leonardo stood regarding the bag of exploded hummus. When he spoke, his tone made his misgivings perfectly clear. "That was – kind of you." He sucked on his tongue for a moment before wondering, "Am I the only one who is a LITTLE worried about the familiarity—"

"You don't need to worry," Raph insisted darkly. "Ain't like she's giving it up to him, okay?"

"He's talked to you about this?"

"No," Raph frowned. "But he don't have to. It's obvious. No chick with looks like that is gonna—"

"You don't know that," Don said in a tone of steel and ice that drew the immediate attention of both brothers. "You don't know much. And you certainly don't know that."

They both stared at him until his shoulders hunched defensively. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be cruel," he added, softer. "But, your logic is flawed. I believe that when two people become familiar with one another, over time – any physical flaws between them can be overcome. When love exists, anyone can – can become beautiful."

Leo waited a beat and finally said with awe, "Don...who on earth said that to you?"

"Sorry," Don whispered hoarsely, dropping his eyes. "I'm not allowed to tell." In that moment, the purple-banded turtle recalled his original goal in coming downstairs in the first place. He snatched his outline from the card table before announcing, "You should know that Master Splinter has finally granted my requests not to teach this lesson. He'll be downstairs momentarily to take over where I left off." Still clutching the outline, he took it with him and fled back up the stairs.

"What the hell was that?" Raphael marveled after him.

"Which part?" Leo wondered numbly.

"All of it!" Raph glanced at him and waved an angry hand. "Angel? Don? The whole fucked up... what the hell WAS all that?"

"I have no idea," Leo shook his head honestly. He paced over to the nearest trash can and pitched the greasy paper bag into it. Then he looked over at his brother and said heavily, "Listen, Raph. I know you want to be a unified front. And you have no idea how much I appreciate that. But the truth is, I haven't wanted to share my plan with you because I don't think you're going to like it very much."

Raphael's mouth dropped open. "What're you talking about?" he spluttered. "What, we can't go five seconds without fighting? Maybe it was kinda rocky between you and me, when you first got back. But it doesn't always have to be that way, alright? I been agreeing with you one hundred percent up until now, for pretty much the whole god-damned day!"

"I know you have," Leo said quietly.

"Do you believe this shit? You got me fighting with you about how much I agree with you!"

"I don't want to fight with you either. That is not what I am trying to do. But at the same time, I'm done feeling angry at Don. I'm *worried* about him, Raph! I'm worried, and - and I'm not very proud of how I treated him."

Raphael was quiet for several beats. Then he gave a small nod and said, "I hear you. I mean, all that shit he just said, the way we heard him shouting at Master Splinter... yeah. Look. It's freaking me out too." He was focused on some indeterminate point rather than meet Leo's gaze as he said, "I would take it back. But it's not so easy for me to talk to him. Not lately."

"You can leave that to me - though to be honest, I still haven't figured out what to say."

"Beats me," Raph admitted.

"And there's more," Leo admitted seriously.

"Course there is," Raph sighed. He flopped onto the nearest arm chair.

"I'm going to tell Splinter the truth."

Raph gave him a long stare.

"I won't say anything if I don't have to, but if he asks directly – and he probably will – I'm sorry, Raph. I'm not going to sit there making up lies for us."

"Fine!" the other turtle decided. Leo looked at him in surprise and Raph gave a careless shrug. "It's YOU we're talking about, so - I kind of figured!"

"And I also – plan to give him a reason. A reason that, ah. Might have excused me from Don's lesson. Which is now..." He had paused with a strange choke, faltering in a way that really was not usual for him. It was enough to make Raph start paying him closer attention. "Splinter's lesson. Which is great, right? Exactly what we wanted!"

Raphael couldn't help noticing that Leo looked sick to his stomach. "It's fucking terrifying," he concurred.

"I don't see what you have to be afraid of. And if you are, listen! Whatever you have done, whatever secret you are hiding, it doesn't sound like you've been *half* as busy as Donatello. Or maybe you have! I don't actually care to hear about any exploits—"

"There haven't been any god-damned *exploits* , okay?"

"Well," Leonardo's face worked with immediate disbelief. "Not to bring up old battles. Because I said I was over it, and I am. But, obviously there was—"

"I never fucked Lucindra," Raphael snarled. "Okay? I never fucked anyone!"

"But..." Leo tilted his head, thinking back on events. This had been common knowledge in his head for so long that he couldn't believe Raph was denying it.

"I know what I let you believe. And – and, I'm sorry! I just wanted – I don't know what I wanted."

Leo stared at him. It irked him, of course, when he thought of how much sleep he had lost over the woman. Yet, somehow these feelings were nullified, because it also touched him that Raph had brought himself to apologize. It impressed him, that it had seemed to weigh heavily on his brother's mind.

"Well, now you know. And would you look at that? We agree." The look Raph gave him was stern. "So, I ask you again. WHAT is the freakin' plan?"

Leonardo swallowed. "The plan is... we tell Splinter exactly why we don't need to hear this lesson. We try to convince him that it doesn't apply to us. "

Raph bobbed his head seriously. He stuck his fist out in front of him. "Unified front."

Leonardo slowly lifted his fist to bump knuckles with Raph, and agreed, "Unified front."

"Are you?" Both turtles jumped and saw their *sensei* standing at the foot of the stairs. "That is interesting."

Leonardo lowered his face and lifted his gaze with intuition. Sure enough, Donatello was trailing not far behind him on the stairs. He was giving them both an inscrutable gaze. Unable to tell what was going on behind Don's calculating eyes, Leonardo feared the worst. Determined to start making amends immediately, he announced formally, "It's true, sensei. As far as this Talk goes, we are unified. And before we begin again, I'd like to apologize to Don on behalf of us both. Raph and I may not completely agree with the way he has taught this lesson, so far. But it was no reason to gang up on you like we did. I, for one, was sick –" He paused briefly to gather his courage before admitting with a flinch, "Hungover, actually. It was making me defensive, quick to irritate, and it's been pointed out that I've been acting kind of like a jerk."

"Okay," Don agreed. He seemed to thaw by several degrees, giving them both a slow nod. "I hear you, Leo. And I'm sorry, too. I was – instigating, near the end. I think I'm upset about -other things."

Leo broke into a weary smile and lifted his voice. "Feel free to stop eavesdropping and come in, Mikey."

Mike stepped out of the shadow of the unlit tunnel leading to the bathroom. "Oh, are we starting now? If this is about to be a group hug, I was gonna bow out."

"I vote no hugging," Raph frowned.

"Moved and seconded," Don muttered as he crossed the room. He took up a gargoyle's perch on the nearest ottoman.

"Well, then," Splinter patted Michelangelo's shell as he went by. "It seems you are safe."

"Whew," Mike grinned.

"Did you have anything else to say for yourself, Leonardo?" Splinter wondered, turning a somewhat sterner look on his eldest.

"Yes. We both wish to be released from the rest of this lesson."

Splinter lifted one whiskered brow. "On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that the lesson –" Leonardo's throat closed. He had to forcibly clear it in order to continue. "It doesn't – apply—"

Raphael tried to come to his brother's rescue. They had agreed to be honest. He couldn't let himself think about it though, or he'd choke worse than Leo. He closed his eyes and said the most honest, obvious answer he could think of: "We ain't ready to have sex yet!"

He wasn't expecting his answer to hang over the room like it did. Everyone was staring at him now. Raph flushed furiously but held his ground.

"Exactly," Leonardo found the courage to break the awkward silence and agree with him. He looked at Splinter boldly. Splinter looked back at him.

The old rat tilted his head thoughtfully. "You have seen this outline. And you find it inappropriate. Correct?" He held up Don's stack of notes.

Leonardo bowed his head slightly with fresh embarrassment. " *Hai.* "

"And you have seen it?" He looked critically at Raphael.

"No. But if Leo thinks it's messed up, then it probably is."

"Forgive my amazement." Splinter studied him shrewdly. "It's not like you to follow Leonardo's opinion blindly."

It was enough to make Raphael want to squirm. He kept his discomfort off his face and said, "I'm not following him blindly. I'm also basing it offa' how I already sat through the whole first part of his stupid lesson. That was reason enough!"

Splinter's lips twitched in a vague smile. He glanced over his shoulder at the whiteboard. "I must admit, I am glad the picture of the young lady has been taken down. I would find it very hard to speak on these topics with her... with her headlights staring at me."

Donatello slipped off the ottoman. Splinter glanced over to watch as his son plucked a writing utensil from the marker tray and popped it open. The marker squeaked as he added to the list on the board which still read BOOBIES, BREASTS, TITS, and HAPPY FUNBAGS.

"What are you doing, Donatello?" Splinter asked, even though it was clear to everyone that he was adding the word HEADLIGHTS.

"Helping. Sorry," Don murmured, capping the marker and scurrying back to his ottoman. Mike, sitting on the couch armrest again, snickered behind one hand. "Honestly, sensei. If they disagree with

what's been taught so far, I'd still really like to hear it. They still haven't managed to give me one bit of useful criticism."

"Fair enough." Splinter looked back at the whiteboard. Aside from the list, the projector was still displaying a list of sexual acts. "How about this most recent lesson. The stages of intimacy. Do you have a problem with this list, Leonardo?"

Leonardo frowned at the list. "Well, I don't wish to discuss those topics with my family."

"And how do you feel, Raphael?"

Raphael sunk down in the couch a little and glanced around. "You know what I think is wrong with it."

"I could venture a guess," Splinter admitted. "But I would rather hear you come out and say it."

Raph lifted his eyes and met his teacher's gaze. He swallowed and got up out of his chair. He took the marker off the marker tray and uncapped it, and slowly scratched a carrot between the words OF and INTIMACY.

STAGES OF **HUMAN** INTIMACY.

"That's what's wrong," he muttered, replacing the cap on the marker and putting it back with a soft clatter.

Splinter gave him an encouraging nod.

Donatello sat up from his hunch. He looked between Splinter and Raphael and the whiteboard. "I don't get it. I mean, obviously this list is based on human standards. But so is – so is our whole society, I mean –" He frowned and fell silent, clearly trying again to puzzle out the deeper meaning in what Raphael was telling him. The idea intrigued him. "You've already spoken to Splinter about all of this?"

"I –" Raph looked trapped now, eyes widening. "He – not – 'zactly, he just—" He grimaced. "We talked about it some. I mean." He looked down and cracked his knuckles furiously.

"We understand each other," Splinter said gently.

"The entire basis of my lesson used the assumption that each of us wanted to be with a human girl at some point or another," Donatello marveled. He had put two and two together. He was unaware that he was giving Raph the same analyzing look that he gave science projects when the results were exciting and unpredictable. His voice was soft and earnest as he searched Raphael's face for confirmation. "You really do mean it, when you say that the lesson doesn't apply to you. This whole ruleset..."

"Of course I mean it!" Raph snapped. "You don't KNOW ME well enough to try and school me on any of this! Your whole stupid list can go to hell. And you know what? I am sick and tired of it! I am SICK AND TIRED of listening to you guys sitting around, discussing fucking bestiality. Like it's the most normal thing in the world!"

Don was arching a brow ridge now, cool as a Vulcan.

Leonardo's eyes were wide and grave, his face full of – what? It wasn't quite pity. "Please go on," he encouraged quietly. Then he sent a glance around and said, more firmly, "Anybody says a word and they'll regret it." He dipped his chin in a small nod, not breaking Raph's gaze. "I promise."

"It's just… it's not… *fair!* " Raph was showing his teeth, trying to make it into a snarl, but only managed to sound miserable. He was beginning to pace the room. "How come *I'm* the one who has to feel like the freak? When you guys are all – I mean, it's just – *sick.* And, what am I supposed ta DO but keep my head down? Play along when you guys are eyein' this an' that bitch on MTV. But the sexiest thing *I* ever saw on TV was on the *fucking Discovery Channel!* "

Mike giggled like a hyena, more nervous than anything. Raph took it the wrong way, balling a fist and stepping towards him.

"I don't know what to say, Raph," Don interjected, leaping up to intercept him. "And probably neither does Mike! We've all just - adapted, I guess." He winced. "What else could we *do* ?"

"Oh yeah, adapted! *No problem!* You got any tips on how I can manage THAT? Maybe that'd be a useful chat for us to have, Donnie boy. Why don't you check your little outline there and tell me when we're getting to *that* part?"

Don glanced at Mater Splinter, then down at the floor. He was embarrassed and needed a brief respite from Raph's wild, accusing gaze. "I – um, I'd have to –"

"Yeah... don't bother. We both know you don't got *shit* for me!"

Mike intervened. "It makes a lot of sense! You know, we ARE turtles! It probably means you're the normal-est. Dude, it took you long enough to spit it out. At first I thought you were coming out to us!"

"Shut your goddamn mouth," Raphael snarled.

"Then again, that would make a lot of sense too!" Mike had never been a good judge of when to back off. "I never did buy you and Jessica Alba."

This time it was Leo who intercepted Mike. "Enough!" he shouted.

"Tell him to shut his mouth or I swear t'God I'm gonna shut it for him!"

"Just tell him he's full of it!" Don countered, still holding Raph back. "Why are you getting so upset? Just tell him it isn't true."

"AND HOW SHOULD I KNOW? How the *fuck* should I know, huh? I've never found a girl who - who even remotely did it for me, I...! *There's no one for me!* "

Mike wondered meekly, "I don't get it. What's so gross about humans?"

"They're just… I don't know! They're soft. Squishy, an' – they're fuckin' pink, okay? PINK! And what's up with ears? Plus they got… all that *hair.* And like… they do all this *shit* to it, so it always smells funny. And they got hair on their arms and their legs sometimes."

"Only lesbians and hippie chicks. Get her a Lady Bic, dude. You'll be good to go!" This earned him a flat stare of disbelief. Mike was well aware that he is missing the point, but he didn't care and pressed on brightly. "Whoa, remember when Britany Spears went mental and shaved her head? She was still pretty smokin' hot!"

"Er –" This derailed Raphael, who remembered thinking it had been a huge improvement when Mike shoved the tabloid in his face excitedly. Mike was head over heels for Britany, and was adamant about watching her videos just for the dancing, and not her sucky music, and he would prove this by turning the mute on whenever people started to tease him. "Well. She was, kinda. But-"

"There ya go!"

"That's fantastic, Mike," Leo rolled his eyes. "Raph, go hook up with Britany Spears. Your problems are solved."

Raph looked at Leo, the tensely knotted muscles in his calves and shoulders relaxing ever so slightly. "Can't," he quipped back softly, giving them a half shrug. "Hair grew back."

"Not to mention she's TOTALLY MINE, and we'd have to battle! Maybe to the death. Because my love for her is pure and true." He giggled. "Besides, her boobs are just way too awesome for you to handle. You might, like, barf all over them."

Raphael saw through his loud, childish humour. Mike was uncomfortable. He'd always spoken to Raphael about cute girls with the assumption that they were on the same page, and Raph let him.

He'd pretty much lied to them all for years. He would miss it, he realized… Mike bouncing up to him, waving a copy of Maxim, shouting that he was serious, this time it was TRUE LOVE!

His face mashed and he looked at the floor sullenly. "Most of the girls you guys are howling and drooling over…" He paused, noticing Don and Leo shoot one another a questioning glance. Privately, he had to admit to himself that neither of them did much drooling or howling. Nonetheless he pressed on with his point, observing darkly, "I look at them and I think… yeah. There's no way. I would break those bitches *in half* . I would…"

He stopped, catching the way Don's expression changed. Mike's did too, to a lesser extent, but Donatello's face went open-mouthed and pale. "Wouldja STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT?" Raph exploded. "I'm not a fucking MONSTER! I'm just sayin!"

Don wrung his hands together. "Well… what about that one girl, Lucindra? Weren't you and her kinda... um, getting along?"

"I... *tried* ," Raph flinched at the hoarse sound creeping into his voice. "I tried to make it work. She was the best I could find. Wasn't all curvy and fragile like most girls. Her body was hard, and she was a helluva fighter... But, I dunno. Sometimes. I think it mighta been more. Just. Just to see if I..." he trails off miserably. "Dismiss me from this lesson, Sensei. Please. I - I need some air. All this, it's too much."

"Raph, wait!" Don insisted. He put himself between Raph and the exit and put his hands up. "Wait, just - give me ten minutes and, and I *swear* to you, I will have found something you can appreciate. Trust in the Booty Drive. And a website called DeviantArt. No matter HOW strange your taste in women could be, I'm willing to bet you fifty bucks she's on there, somewhere! Please trust me, Raph! There's a whole *community* on the internet that calls themselves Furries, but they're not only into mammals! There are anthropomorphic dragons, and other..."

"I don't want your porn, Don!" Raphael grimaced, cutting his brother off. He pushed past Don and continued toward the door. "It will never be the same as a real person, anyway."

Leonardo stared after him. His posture tightened as he realized that Master Splinter was honing at him.

"You wish to leave as well," the old rat deduced.

"Yes. The lesson doesn't apply to me."

"For the same reasons as your brother?" Splinter wondered. "You have not been as open with me as Raphael has on this matter."

"Ahh," Leonardo stalled and broke into a sweat. Finally he said, "More or less. I'm not ready to have sex. Let's just leave it at that." With a scowl, he looked in the direction Raph had disappeared and murmured, "Besides, someone should go after him."

"Fine," Splinter sighed. "Go. We shall continue without you."

Leo didn't waste any time. A moment later, it was just the three of them.

"Maybe they've had the right idea all along," Donatello mumbled, drawing his arms up around his knees. Splinter and Mike both wound up studying him. He looked so unhappy. "Maybe I'm the only one who needed this Talk. For me, it came too late. There must be something wrong with me."

No... poor Donnie, Mike thought *.* A creeped out feeling had spread over his skin, and not for the first time. *He must have hurt someone.*

Braver Than Me

Chapter 16 – Braver Than Me:

Leo dropped down into a comfortable crouch beside Raphael. He was seated in the shadows on one of his favorite rooftops. It gave him a good vantage point of the concrete jungle of New York City sprawled out beneath them. He said nothing for awhile, just joining his silent sentry over the bustle of pedestrians moving below them. Finally, Leonardo broke the silence to murmur, "So are you all right, then?"

He paused to glance over and check Raph's expression, hunting for tension or some signal to drop the issue. The younger turtle continued to stare ahead, brooding but otherwise calm. After a moment Leo continued quietly. "Hey, listen. I just want you to know that I thought it was really brave."

Raph gave a depreciative snort. "Oh yeah, which part? When I nearly decked Mike? When I had to make a run for it?"

"No." Leo's eyes were dark and serious. "Just... that you said that stuff at all. About not feeling anything for humans... All these years, you've felt different from the rest of us and I had no idea. None of us did." He shook his head gently and looked over at Raph. "And we just went on assuming… It must have been really hard for you."

Raph could say nothing to this, scowling faintly.

The silence stretched. Once again Leo was the one to break it. "I think you're a lot braver than me sometimes."

This earned a wary glance from him. "Fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"Raph... listen." Leo trained his gaze straight ahead and forced out the difficult words – words he had never said out loud before. "I.

Ahh… I'm bisexual."

Raph's eyes widened. "What?"

Leonardo's narrowed his eyes a little, his brow ridges furrowing. He spoke without looking at Raph. "You heard me. I'm not saying it twice."

"You..." Raph whirled to face Leo, his shoulders coming up defensively, "Why are you telling me this?" he demanded, soft and incredulous.

"I just—" Panic flit briefly across Leo's face, before it was covered up by his usual calm, unreadable mask.

Suddenly Raph was on his feet, his hands balled into fists, and snarling. "Why are you telling me this?" he repeated. "For the first time in god knows how long, I'm NOT confused anymore and – *why the FUCK are you telling me this, Leo?* "

"It's not about YOU, shell-for-brains!" Leo leapt to his feet in a blaze and squared off as if readying himself for a fight. "The world does not revolve around you!"

Raphael's mouth worked, but he found that his temper was quickly evaporating. A part of him wished he could somehow hold onto it. Maybe then he could square off too and shout some things, and they could knock each other around… once again solving their problems with misguided violence! Maybe it would give his toppled world enough time to right itself. But all of the anger had drained from his shoulders and bled out of his voice as he finally croaked, "Leo…"

Leonardo was too spooked now, too full of pride. His posture shifted defensive, drawn tight as a crossbow. "Maybe I thought – if, if you had been feeling *different* from the rest of us. That maybe you - of all people would –"

"Wait, buddy – now hold it right there. I'm just trying to make sure you realize that I don't – that I'm really not-—"

"IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU!" Leonardo boomed, spreading his arms. "What do you think I'm trying to DO here? *Come on* to you? You are NOT my type, Raph! And let's not forget that you're my brother , which makes the whole thought kind of *sick!* So - look, you know what? Forget it! Forget I said ANYTHING! I don't know why I even thought I could talk to you!" He felt a sob bounce off his diaphragm and catch fast in his throat, had to get away before the effort of swallowing it could twist his face. He tore off in a run.

Raphael ran after him.

He wound up chasing him over rooftops and then scrabbling down a fire escape and through a maze of alleyways. At first he tried shouting things like, "STOP!" and "Wouldja just CALM DOWN a second?" but Leo wouldn't stop, wouldn't slow, and there was nothing to do but keep chasing him.

Finally the mad chase lead them back down into the sewer, but in the opposite direction of the lair. They ran. They ran until Raph was no longer sure where they were anymore. Leo did not do him the courtesy of tearing off in a straight path, either. Oh no. He was ducking through pipes, leaping up ladders and down into ravines, trying desperately to shake his pursuer. Sloshing through slime and muck, Raphael was not trying to communicate anymore, aside from the occasional swearing under his breath. It was all he could do just to keep up.

They had always been evenly matched, and tonight was no different. Raphael found himself praying to every god he'd ever heard of that his brother would tire by the time Leonardo did finally stumble to a halt. He stood there a moment and finally threw a slow, exhausted look over one shoulder.

Raph stopped too and looked back at him, panting. Leo shook his head as if in slow defeat. He moved to a ledge hanging over a

shallow canal, sat down, and let one leg dangle while tucking the other up and hugging it close to his body. Even now, panting softly and clearly spent, there was something poised and graceful in the way he held himself, unable to let his posture slump completely. Forever unable to simply relax. It was a curse, perhaps.

Raphael, on the other hand, had no problems depositing himself in a sloppy heap on the ledge beside him. "Ya done?" he huffed, mopping his brow with the back of one hand. "Or… we just… takin' a breather?"

"I'm done," Leonardo said distantly.

Raphael couldn't help feeling annoyed that his older brother didn't sound nearly so out of breath when he spoke. But then, Leo knew how to put up a good front better than anyone he knew. "Good run," he blurted, not sure what to say now that he'd finally caught up to Leo. "Been… relyin' on that bike too much, maybe… Been awhile. Since I got… that kinda exercise."

"Yeah," Leo played along wryly, like they had just been out for a friendly sprint together. "Good night for it."

"So that was new, huh? You runnin' off half-cocked… me hollerin' at you, tryin' to calm you down."

"I guess it was kind of backwards."

"Look, so… uh. That thing you said."

Leonardo said nothing but shot him a warning glance. He'd been hoping the friendly banter meant they could just drop it.

Raph missed Leo's look all together. He was scowling down at the water, swinging his legs gently. "I just… wanted to say. You know. I'm cool with it."

"Yeah. Sure you are."

"No, really! I mean, it's like… okay. Whatever."

Leonardo looked away, apparently not impressed with Raphael's sincere attempt to start over. Jesus. Compassionate, heartfelt talks were just not his thing. Couldn't he have picked Don for this coming out of the closet bullshit? Or even Mikey? Mikey would crack jokes about it, but at least by the end of it he'd have got Leo to smile.

Frustrated at the growing silence, Raphael decided to try a Mike approach instead. "So, uh. What is 'your type', anyway?"

Leonardo scowled and refused to look at him. "Screw you, Raph."

"No, I'm serious! I'm just trying to wrap my head around it, all right? Cut me some slack here!"

"I suppose Casey's not bad," Leo shot back without missing a beat, just trying to get a reaction.

He got one.

"Eeegghhhh!" Raph scrunched his face at the idea, recoiling. He stopped when he saw Leo looking daggers at him. "Sorry. Are you serious, really? It's just. Y'know, he's my friend, and. That's just-" He couldn't help it and said it again with more feeling. "Egghhhgghhh!"

"No, not really," Leonardo murmured. Mirth crept into his voice, though he wouldn't let it touch the rest of his face. "He's not bad to look at, I guess, but his personality pretty much blows it for me."

"Heh."

Ok, the silence was starting to stretch again. Raph felt he had to say something before it became unbearably awkward. He wracked his brain for a moment before coming up with, "Hey, so. Are you sure?"

Leo sighed again. "Do you really think I would have worked up the nerve to say something if I wasn't? Of *course* I'm sure."

"No chance you're just, like… all the way gay?"

Leonardo patience seemed to be wearing thin with this line of questioning. He repeated. "Of *course* I'm sure. Okay, maybe it's—" his voice tightened. "Skewed slightly. Towards. I mean, it takes a certain kind of girl. But there *have* been girls I've wanted."

"Okay," Raph returned, so calmly that it was almost annoying. "Well… damn. That's too bad."

"What—" Leonardo turned slowly and began to stare at him. Raph didn't return his look, pretending not to notice it and gazing out across the reservoir. "Wait, *what* did you just say?"

"I said, DAMN." Raphael turned to stare back at him now, and did a decent job of checking his grin. "That's too bad!"

Leonardo went from baffled to worried. "Uh. Right. Course you did. So… huh. Why would you WANT me to. To be…" He couldn't finish the sentence, and went back to just staring at Raph incredulously.

"Because," Raphael answered him patiently, with a straight face, "it would mean you weren't still hot for that evil cunt, Karai."

Leo continued to look at him, his face totally blank. His lips twitched once.

"Oh, come *on* ," Raph groaned, punching him hard on the arm. "Will you LET GO already? That was *fucking hilarious.* "

Leo pressed his lips together even tighter, but it was no good. All the tension broke along with his composure. It was a contagious thing to watch and soon Raph was cracking up too.

For a long time they could not even speak, doubled over and holding their sides with laughter.

Author's note: Double post... SURPRISE! And Merry Xmas gang!

- Winny

Experience

Author's Note:

The giant flashback contained in this chapter was guest written by the glorious PRINCESSEBEE, a.k.a. the author of Dust of Life and plenty of other phenomenal TMNT, Batman, and Pirates of the Caribbean fanfics here on FFnet.

Chapter 17: Experience

Mike's head was a whirl with awful alternatives. Who could it have been? Donnie, of all people! Who could he possibly have hurt? Who had said she loved him, in spite of physical differences?

Something in his gut still said "April", but that didn't make sense. There was a period where April and Casey had kept their distance – Mike had even suspected that they had been on the rocks during that time - but surely he'd have heard about it if something major had happened! If she had been hurt, surely he would have known about it!

He didn't realize he had been tuning out his brother and father until they started talking specifically about *him.*

"Then perhaps Michelangelo—"

"Mikey's only kissed a girl before! And even that experience sounded pretty questionable."

"Wait, what?" Mike blinked. "What'd I miss?"

Donatello waved a vague hand towards Mike. "Splinter thinks you still need this lesson."

"Who did he kiss?" Splinter was still catching up. "And… *when* did we learn this?"

"Earlier," Don explained breezily, like it was ancient history. "He told us a goofy story that wasn't very specific. But I'm going to take a wild stab in the dark and assume that he tried to make out with Angel and it went horribly wrong."

"I wouldn't call it... making out, exactly," Michelangelo corrected with a flinch. It was always embarassing when Don's guesses were right on the money, especially regarding personal matters. "It was more of a... you know, I would have told the story better, but whatever. It WAS pretty lame. Maybe one of the lamest moments in history. So… yeah."

"Do you expect to get another chance with her?"

"No," Mike sighed. "You're right. It was a total fluke."

"There, you see?" Don got up and tossed himself shell-down onto the couch. He stared up at the ceiling. "So let's just call the whole thing off. We can finally put an end to this nightmare – or put it off for a few more years, at least."

"Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute," Mike frowned. "What are you guys trying to say about me, exactly? Why are we calling it off for my sake?"

"Do you disagree with this?" Splinter wondered quietly. He had that annoying, knowing look in his eye as he studied his youngest son. "It would be wiser to ask him directly."

Don blew out a slow breath. His gaze slid sidewise to regard Mike. "Fine. Mikey, do you feel like you're ready to be sexually active?"

Mike's eyes widened. He looked from Don to Master Splinter. "Just like that, are you serious? You expect me to— just—"

"Yes," Master Splinter affirmed.

Mike's weighted silence earned their attention better than anything he could have said to them.

Don shifted onto his side and propped his head up in one hand, watching him intently. "Well, Mike?" he prompted. "It's a pretty straight-forward question."

"No it isn't!" Mike complained. "You'd have to be the freakin' Dolly Llama to answer that question about yourself!"

"Now you're just stalling," Don smirked.

"Damn straight! That question is not just incredibly awkward." Mike gave a pointed nod in Splinter's direction, "It's downright suicidal!"

The old rat frowned. "Michelangelo, please! I only ask for your own good. Donatello has made the point that it could be dangerous, if you wind up in a - a situation. Without being prepared."

"Dangerous?" Mike gulped. "How dangerous are we talking?" He glanced over his shoulder and looked down, wagging his stumpy tail. "Is it going to explode?"

"Michelangelo!" His sensei looked as though his patience was being strained now. "Answer the question honestly, and I swear you will not be punished for it."

Mike fell back into silence. Wheels were turning inside his mind. The more he thought about it, this had the sound of a golden opportunity. The youngest turtle's tongue darted out in response to a suddenly dry mouth. Never - NEVER in a million years – did he think he might be tempted to spill his guts about this! But he knew that Splinter was good for his word. He could admit to anything…

"I refuse to answer that question!" he insisted at last. "It's not a fair thing to ask someone. But still, you shouldn't write me off so easy.

You guys are always doing that. You think I'm so naïve and clueless. Well, let me tell you a story…"

He'd dialled the number with a trembling hand.

He'd been rehearsing this moment over and over in his head for months, knew exactly what to say, just how to play it.

But when the other end was answered, he'd found himself inarticulate, struggling to force discernible words through the series of croaks and squeaks that were filling his throat.

It wasn't helped by the woman on the other end sighing impatiently and saying in a crisp tone that he was going to have to speak clearly if he expected her to understand what he wanted and how to help him.

Finally, he'd managed to stammer out that he wanted to book Mercedes that evening.

"Mercedes is all booked up for the evening," the woman said smoothly, "but we have many other lovely ladies equally beautiful and charming who would be delighted to entertain you. What sort of experience are you looking for?"

" *Experience?" What sort of* experience *was he looking for? Wha?*

After a few more uhs and ums down the line the receptionist interjected: "Is this your first time booking an escort, sir?"

"Y-yeah."

"That's no problem at all. We have a few lovely girls who are very experienced with first timers." Her voice suddenly became sharp. "You do understand that the service our ladies provide is for companionship only? Sexual activity of any description is not included in the service fee."

What? He was very confused now. Escorts – they were prostitutes, right? He was sure of it! Well, the ad hadn't *said* , specifically, but – it was certainly suggestive –

"Really?" He squeaked. "I – I thought – "

"Of course, anything you and the lady choose to do together is what you will decide as two consenting adults and it is understood that you have paid no money to the lady on behalf of Moonlight Fantasy Escorts for any sexual activities." The receptionist interrupted, efficient but bored-sounding, as though she were reading from a script.

He wasn't entirely sure what it all meant, but had decided to go ahead with it. Way too much planning and thought had gone into this night to back out now.

He'd first come across the ad in a skin rag, soft-core porn he'd found at the dump, a great dog-eared pile of it. It was a recent magazine and the ad had read:

Looking for a beautiful date to add some spice to your evening? Try me… MERCEDES… I'm twenty-one years old, busty and affectionate, waiting to thrill you all night long. Phone Moonlight Fantasy Escorts to book me and make your night an unforgettable one!

The accompanying photograph was stunning. Caramel skin and luminous green eyes, cascading black hair with golden high-lights and a perfect face, high cheek bones, full lips and a narrow nose. She was dressed in a form-fitting and revealing gown, plunging neckline displaying an impressive cleavage.

She was everything Michelangelo had ever fantasised about.

It had taken him a good two months to save. The twenty dollars Donatello gave him from each Cowabunga Carl job had been squirrelled away, enclosed within a crisp, clean envelope then tucked

between the pages of *Silver Sentry #10* , a comic book too valuable to be read on a regular basis – or even taken out of its protective plastic bag.

He'd rung them only once, to find out how much it was and then he'd saved. Two hours with the escort – six hundred dollars. Motel room – one hundred dollars. It had almost killed him (literally – he'd lost, like, five pounds from having such a limited supply of munchies to choose from), but he'd done it. It helped that September hit and the number of birthday gigs went up. At the two-hundred dollar mark almost halfway there and a month and a quarter gone, it occurred to him that he could schedule his own gigs. The realisation had struck him like revelation – there was absolutely no reason why not – was there? No! When he thought about it he couldn't come up with a single one (well, apart from the fact that it would be going behind Donnie's back AND keeping all the cash for himself instead of contributing it to the family BUT he did his share already which is sure more than Mikey could say for Raphie, and wasn't he allowed to have just a *little* fun, yes he was, darn it!) and by crossing out the lair's payphone number and writing his personal cell on the cards and flyers at a couple of different gigs (not *all* of them after all!), the gigs soon came chasing after him.

After that, things moved far swifter than he could've believed. Donatello didn't seem to notice that Michelangelo was reading the same comics over and over or that his intake of junk food went considerably down.

Finally, he had the lot, a thick little stack that sent a thrill through him just to look at it in his hands. And he was ready to make that call.

And Mercedes had to be booked out – of course! But he couldn't wait another night for her. Couldn't wait another night period. The receptionist had taken over the call, coaching him as through he were a small child:

"Would you like blonde, brunette or redhead?"

"B – blonde."

"Busty or petite?"

"B-busty."

"Late teens, early twenties, late twenties?"

"Uh – teens."

"Sir, since this is your first time, may I suggest someone a bit older who will have had more experience? The younger ones can be a little bit more insensitive, lack grace in some areas."

"Oh – okay."

Finally the receptionist had decided on Vivienne, a "glamorous, gorgeous platinum blonde with a triple-D bust and a wonderful personality" who was also "friendly and understanding and would be perfect to guide you through your first Moonlight Fantasy experience to make it a mind-blowing and memorable one".

"She'll be there at nine sharp, sir."

His throat was dry.

"Are you there, sir?" Her voice was sharp again. "If you change your mind, please do phone to cancel so as not to waste Vivienne's time. All right?"

"I'll be here." He croaked and hung up.

He sat on the chair in the motel room, hands gripping the seat, sitting up ramrod straight. *Boy Splinter would be pleased to see me now* , went curiously round his head as he recalled all the times he'd been scolded for slouching.

Eight-forty-five.

Fifteen minutes.

The room was tiny and it smelled funny. Like mothballs and some sort of cleaning agent and something else, pungent and cloying. Kind of reminded him of – naaaah. But he'd bet he wasn't the only one who'd used this room for this purpose. He drummed his fingers on the underside of the seat. *Ohboyohboyohboyohboy.*

If Don knew where he was, he'd be turtle soup.

Eight-fifty.

The lights were turned down way low. He wanted them off altogether but he thought that might frighten her. He'd turn them off after she arrived.

He was dressed in big, baggy sweatpants and top, a beanie pulled down tight on his head, a scarf wrapped around his neck, covering the lower half of his face.

He was going to be careful about it.

Eight-fifty-five.

A bunch of street-vendor flowers wrapped in paper lay on the scratched surface of the desk under the window. He'd thought about champagne but he had no I.D. and there was no way he was asking Casey – besides he thought it might seem a little – try hard. But the flowers – well, he thought he should get her something. After all. And every girl liked flowers, right?

A rap on the door startled him out of his thoughts.

This was it.

He tried to get out of the seat, to stand up and walk to the door, but found he couldn't. He was stuck there, as surely as if he'd fallen for one of his own pranks – superglue on Don's computer chair – but he hadn't done that for a couple of years at least – not since –

The knock came again, louder this time.

She'll go if you don't answer the door, dweeb.

That finally propelled him up and across the room, grasping the door by its flimsy handle and pulling it open, stepping back into the shadows of the room.

She stood there, smiling, peering at him in the darkness, backlit by the hall light.

"Hi there, I'm Vivienne. Are you Mike?"

Mike had sounded more mature than Mikey.

"Yeah – " he rasped and cleared his throat. "Yes. Yes, please come in."

She entered and he shut the door behind her, moved around her to the desk. She was looking the room up and down, corner to corner and he hemmed.

"Sorry it's not a nicer place."

She half-smiled. "Believe me, I've been in worse."

He realised that she wasn't checking out the décor. She was sussing out the room. Her eyes took in the window, noted the fire escape, ran down the edge of the bed – not enough room for anyone to hide under there – assessed the flickering shadows of each corner – peered into the tiny bathroom, considered the possibility of someone being in the little shower stall. Only then – and it took only a few seconds – did she come fully into the room.

He proffered the flowers to her, shyly, heart beating hard against his plastron, not quite daring to raise his eyes. She took them with a luminous smile.

"Thank you – what a lovely gesture. You want me to stay for two hours, right?"

Speechlessly, he nodded.

"Okay, no problem." She paused, waited. He stared at her, silent. She raised her brows at him and he felt a sudden panic course through him. *Oh no, she expected him to **do** something - but* what? She laughed a little and smiled kindly at him. "So, that's six hundred dollars for two hours."

Oh, right.

He fumbled in the pocket of his sweat shirt, found the rolled up wad of notes and handed it over to her, hoping she didn't notice his sweaty palms. She counted it quickly and rolled it up again. "Perfect. I just need to call the office and let them know I'm here."

He nodded again but she wasn't looking at him. She put her purse down on the desk and shrugged out of her coat. He realised he should've helped her with that – too late now – and anxiously wrung his hands as she fished her mobile phone out of her purse and dialled, sauntering over to the window to look out at the buzzing street below.

He took the opportunity to examine her closely.

Underneath her coat she wore a tight red dress. It fell off her shoulders and came down low on her breasts, clung to her body and stopped just above her knees. She wasn't fat, but she wasn't slim either. Her platinum blonde hair fell to her shoulders and was styled with a forties wave to it. Her face was round, her eyes large and green with sharp, arched black eyebrows, a turned up nose and very full, very red lips. Her enormous breasts swelled above her dress like ripe fruit, quivering slightly with each little move she made. Her waist nipped in and her hips flared out and he saw, as she spoke to the person on the other end of the call, that there was a soft curve to her

belly. Her legs were long and shapely and her pointy high heels were the same red as her dress.

She was beautiful, but she was no Mercedes.

He was aware of a dull sort of disappointment echoing at the back of his chest. He might only have one opportunity to do this and he'd really wanted –

"So, " she said, snapping her phone shut and tucking it back into her purse. "Kimmy says this is your first time. You nervous?"

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, a sly smile curving her lip upwards and he felt his heart pick up pace.

He could tough-talk it. Throw on some of Raphie's machismo, grab his crotch, square his shoulders and say how he wasn't afraid of no ho. But the little smile and the twinkle in her eye was undoing him.

"I think I'm gonna hurl **,"** he confided jokingly and she half-laughed, striding past him and over to the sagging bed where she sat, crossing her legs over.

"You want to come sit by me?"

He did. He wanted to very much. But he couldn't. The success of this whole encounter depended on it.

So instead he shook his head, pulled the chair out from under the desk, shaking hands fumbling clumsily to get it positioned just right.

"I'm just gonna sit over here." He sat down, his knees pressed together, hands clasping them.

She was looking at him with something like amusement, leaning back on the palms of her hands. "Not a lot you can do from over there, honey."

He coughed, tapped his heels on the gritty carpet. "'S cool. I'm happy over here. And you look fine over there. I think this arrangement will work out really well." His voice came out as a strangled whine. *Shit shit shit shit. You sound like such a loser, nimrod.*

Suddenly understanding dawned on her face. "Hey, this is your *first* time, isn't it?"

He knew what she meant. After a long moment, he nodded shyly.

"Is that weird?" He asked and she laughed, rolled over onto her stomach on the bed, ankles in the air.

"No way, honey. Lots of guys do it. They just want to get it over and done with and figure it's just easier and less complicated to hire a prostitute, you know? You're not the first virgin I've seen. Don't sweat it. "

Her voice was kind and he felt instantly better. "That's a relief." He supposed it didn't matter so much that she wasn't his fantasy girl. She was really *nice* and her boobs were pretty damn huge –

"So how about you come over here and let me give you a massage." She looked over at him from lowered lashes and patted the mattress beside her stretched out form. "Help you relax a little."

He felt his tail stir, drop an inch or two. He clenched his muscles, holding it up with a supreme force of will. Dude, she *just got here* – don't lose all control yet!

"I – I think I'm just going to stay here. If it's cool. I – I just – I don't think – I mean, I don't want – that is, I can't – can't really – you know – *do* the – the – you know."

She was nodding, an expression of sympathy adopted on her features. "Look, a lot of first timers are afraid it's going to be a non-event, you know, it'll all be over in a few minutes – but trust me, I'm an expert at this and I will make sure you have a great – "

"No," he cut her off, feeling slightly desperate. "I mean - I really can't. I just – just wanna talk. And stuff. It just – look, trust me – it just wouldn't work. I'm a little – um – that is – "

A slightly puzzled look was creasing her brow but otherwise she kept her expression neutral. Finally he burst out:

"I'm a little different."

Now her eyebrows were very high up on her head. "Oh honey, you don't need to worry about that. I have seen all types over the years and nothing shocks me. You can rest assured that you will have a non-judgemental experience with me." Her voice had become brisk and professional, as though she were presenting a product. Which, she was.

Suddenly, he wanted to.

He wanted to *so much.*

He wanted to just stride over to her, pull her dress from her shoulders, rip his sweats off and let his cock emerge. He had to thrust his hands in his pockets, draw back against the chair, chin to plastron, scarf hitching up to muffle his mouth, looking resolutely away.

"Just – just trust me." He managed to say through gritted teeth. "And uh – uh – condoms wouldn't fit me, anyway." He'd seen those tiny, flaccid, fragile-looking things. Mikey wasn't exactly sure how he'd stack up against other mutant turtles, but he was pretty sure condoms were a no-go for him.

Unimpressed, she raised an eyebrow and sat up on her knees, lifted a hand to her mouth, withdrawing a small clear object. Moving it around in her hands, he saw that it was an unwrapped condom. She brought one foot around in front of her, still clad in its bright red stiletto heel. Stretching the condom open with both hands, in one

swift motion she covered the whole of her foot up to the heel with the condom, then grinned at him.

"Wow!" he couldn't help exclaiming and she chuckled. Somehow her nonchalance, her easy self-assurance, was easing him.

"But, anyway - ," he said, still with his hands gripped together hard in his pockets, casting his gaze back down. " – it's just really not an – an option, I guess."

She shrugged. "It's up to you, honey. We spend the time the way you want to. I just want to make sure you're happy with that decision and won't call up the agency later complaining you didn't get what you paid for."

"Oh I wouldn't do that!" he assured her. "I swear, I'll be happy if we just talk and maybe – well. Maybe you could like – um – " his tongue had become thick and furry in his mouth, the words getting lost amongst its fibres and she offered him a saucy, knowing grin.

"Maybe I could give you a bit of show?" she suggested teasingly and he'd felt the blood rush to his cheeks, making them hot.

"Y-yeah." And now that it had been said, he didn't feel so nervous. "So – uh – why did you have the condom in your mouth?"

She grinned. "Well, I think I can trust you with that little secret." She reached into her purse and withdrew a small foil packet, tore it open and pulled out a new condom. She tucked it into her cheek, rummaged around in her purse some more and pulled out a long, pink and purple vibrator. Lifting it to her lips she pushed it into her mouth and when she pulled it out again, he saw that she'd deftly covered it with the condom.

Eyes widening, he applauded her appreciatively and she'd laughed, a rich, throaty sound that sent a thrill through him.

"That way it isn't even up for discussion – most guys don't even notice."

"For real?"

"You bet. Well, guys tend not to notice much when they're getting a blowjob." She'd winked at him and inside his tail, he felt his cock twitch. *I wish…*

"So… Mike…" she set the vibrator on the bed next to her. "What did you want to talk about?" Her green eyes flickered to his face, still muffled by the scarf and obscured in the half-light, and her gaze was steady and sure, her fingertips lightly stroking the length of the toy. Okay, his tail was *definitely* descending now and there was going to be nothing he could do to stop it… her eyes were *so* piercing and her face was *so* pretty, and man, her boobs were *so damn huge.*

He leaned hastily over the desk and fumbled with the light switch on the lamp. "I'm just going to turn this off – is that okay? I'll just feel better."

The room was plunged into shadows, the only light now coming from the blinking neon sign outside, red and green and yellow, washing the room in brief, and stark flashes.

"You don't have to be nervous about the way you look." Her voice was tender and kind and he glanced over at her sharply.

"How did you – "

She chuckled, stretched out on the bed again. "The way you're all covered up. Sitting so far from me. Lights down. At first I thought you were a cop, but it's obvious you're not. I got a regular client who's a double amputee, another who's a paraplegic and another who has had third degree burns to sixty percent of his body. It doesn't matter what you look like." Her face was fully illuminated in a brief flash of red, her expression was soft and gentle, lips curved in a sweet little smile. There was something – something almost *motherly* about her

and he wanted to go to her, lay his head against her (awesomely) massive cleavage. He knew he couldn't. And once again he felt the prick of disappointment.

"I have a pretty severe skin condition." He lied quickly. "I'm just more comfortable this way."

She let it go after that and they moved back to what he wanted to talk about.

He'd planned this as well. He had questions. Lots of them. About girls. And about what to do with girls.

"I hope you don't mind."

She rolled over onto her back, kicking off her stilettos, laughing. She was so organic, so soft and full. He was near hypnotised by the fluidity of her movement, the way her breasts undulated with her motion, how the locks of her hair slid through her fingers as she pushed one hand through it. "I'm the best sorta person to ask, sweetie. I don't mind at all!"

And finally it had all come pouring out. What to do with girls. What he'd seen in magazines or in movies. How to act with a girl if you happened to be out with one. How to ask a girl out. What it was like to be a girl.

And as the word *girl* came up again and again he became ever more intensely aware that he was *in a room with an actual, real, live, breathing girl* . A *sexy* girl. A sexy, *sexually available* girl. Michelangelo had met lots of sexy girls, comparatively really. But none of them had ever been available. To him, at any rate. But this one was. For the princely sum of six hundred dollars he had bought the ability to have sex with her and what was he doing? Sitting in a chair several feet away, in the dark, hands in pockets and face muffled, sporting a painfully hard erection that had him continuously shifting in his seat and completely, utterly, devastatingly unable to do anything about it.

And then he'd started asking about her. It was good he hadn't brought champagne; she didn't drink. Or take drugs. Or even smoke. By day she was a Project Manager with a major corporation. She'd worked in the sex industry for twelve years and with the money she'd made owned two properties in Manhattan and had investments that returned nicely. She was a strict vegan and wouldn't even wear leather shoes. She used to demonstrate with PETA. She went overseas every year to a tropical country. She collected Elvis records. She tried to have an orgasm with every client. Made the job more fun and was an ego-boost for them. She talked so confidently, was so natural the way she moved and shifted on the bed, he was quite taken with her, her lack of resemblance to Mercedes becoming less and less noticeable, the slight plumpness of her figure, the film of hardness on her face that indicated that she was older than the twenty-seven she claimed, the dark roots just beginning to show in her hairline – it all faded out, aided by the darkness of the room and the moody blink of the neon and soon he was dreamily thinking he'd never seen anything quite so beautiful.

"I tried to book Mercedes," he admitted sheepishly. "But I'm glad I got you instead."

"Thank you, honey." She said but then laughed very hard.

"What?" defensiveness crept into his voice and she shook her head.

"I'm not supposed to tell you, but I will. Mercedes doesn't exist. She's just a stock model photo the agency has bought rights to use and they've made up an "identity" to go with it. So when the clients ring up, "Mercedes" is always booked up but, not to worry, " she mockingly took on the tone of the efficient receptionist, "we've got lots of ladies equally as lovely as her who'll be happy to make your evening a special one! They've got a few different ones in different publications."

He wasn't sure how to take that. Somehow, he felt cheated – deceived. Mercedes – that gorgeous dream girl – wasn't real? So he

said nothing, sat there silently with a wounded feeling in his chest and she'd glanced at her mobile phone and clicked her tongue.

"Hate to say this Mike, but we've only got a half-hour left. How about you get a bit of bang for your buck, hrm?"

And his throat was dry again, his palms instantly damp in his pockets.

"Okay." He squeaked and she'd sat up, got to her feet, smiling indulgently.

"You're cute," she crooned. She fiddled with the cheap alarm clock radio next to the bed until she'd found a station playing danceable music, a mix of old sixties tunes, crackling and tinny. She undulated to the music, her curvaceous figure throwing an attractive silhouette against the wall. She raised her arms slowly, swaying on her bare feet, her hands moving up through her hair. His hard-on, which had softened during their chat, was suddenly flaring up again, fierce and pushing hard against the seat of his sweats, angrily demanding attention.

But he had to keep his hands in his pockets.

Slowly, the escort unzipped her dress and slid it down over her shoulders, pushed it down around her waist and hips, turning in a circle, swaying her hips back and forth so that the dress fell to the carpet in a heap. She kicked it away, ran her hands up over her stomach, her breasts, back down again. She was wearing a tiny red bra and g-string. In the flare and fade of neon, she seemed slimmer, her stretchmarks invisible, her skin peachy and flawless.

He watched her, unable to blink, aware that his eyeballs were becoming more and more dry, like his mouth which felt like it was choked up with sand. He could feel his cock pulsing hot and slowly, he shifted, the rickety chair creaking beneath his weight.

Se turned away from him, undoing her bra, letting the straps fall off her shoulders, glancing back over one. He hadn't thought it possible, but his cock got harder then as the strap lifted, baring her back completely. She turned back to him, holding the bra so that it continued to cover her ample breasts, teasing him now with her smile. *Oh man – what if he – in his* pants *– how humiliating would that be?*

She turned away again, tossing the bra to one side, then dropped her hands to fiddle with the sides of her g-string, teasing it slowly down and off her hips, over her round thighs, her shapely bottom now also completely bare.

When she'd kicked the tiny scrap of material away and turned to him, completely naked, he'd made an audible noise, a strange, longing, choking little whimper and she continued to dance, smiling and moving in rhythmic beat to the music. She was *so beautiful* . Sheer perfection. Better, more vivid, softer than anything he'd seen in 2D before.

So captivated was he, but the way her breasts softly jiggled as she moved, the curve of her belly, the strip of dark hair curling down her pubis, and, below that the tormenting little crevice he could barely drag his eyes from, that before he was aware she was doing it, she'd danced over to him, mere inches from him in fact, turning around and around right in front of him. He wouldn't even need to stretch his arm to touch her. She turned her back to him and bent over, offering him a full and complete view of what she kept between her legs. He'd always *hoped* , and sort of even expected one day he'd get the opportunity in full technicolour 3D, but somehow he couldn't quite believe the day had come. He almost lost control then, but managed to hold on, drive it back down, not humiliate himself just yet. She turned back around, swung her breasts in his face, large dark nipples so close to his lips he could practically taste them.

But she respected his wishes and moved back against the bed, stretching out onto it so that when she spread her legs either side he had the most clear, the most glorious view.

Reaching back up behind her she located the vibrator and switched it on, running it down the length of her body and making strangled little gasps. He gritted his teeth hard, balled his fists in his pockets, dug his toes into the carpet. *Ooooooh boy.*

The vibrator slid over her hips, around her inner thighs, whirring away over the soft beat of the radio. As he watched move ever higher, to the soft, secret place now fully exposed to him, he became aware that it was building up, that it was right on the verge of breaking free, bubbling out of his throat no matter how tightly he pressed his mouth shut, dropped his soft palette, lifted his tongue to block his throat. That damned *noise* , that thoughtless traitor.

Inwardly he flailed, struggled wildly to hold it back even as he felt a thunderous pulsing through his cock, watching the vibrator in its plunging exploration, suddenly acutely, wildly, vividly aware of what it would feel like if it was *him* doing that to her, held snug and tight in her warm, moist depths. Her moans were growing louder and her free hand was rubbing roughly at the little ball above her entrance, the one that seemed to hold a lot of importance to girls. Just as her cries reached a crescendo and erupted into one long, hearty moan. A sharp, loud *burr* escaped his throat, a peal of chattering he couldn't suppress, and he barely got a bunched up handful of sweatshirt up to his mouth in time though it barely helped, the noise sounded horrifically loud to him. But concern was washed aside as he felt that familiar, yet endlessly novel, ecstasy run through him like a wave of pins and needles.

They sat there in silence for a few moments, the neon continuing to flash outside the window, he aware of the dampness in his sweats and the rich, pungent smell of her in the closed air.

Then she'd sat up, giggling a little, unashamed and natural in her nakedness, winking at him.

"Hows that for a happy ending?" she laughed, and went to gather her clothes, languidly stepping into her g-string and fastening her bra back up, bending at the waist to ensure the cups captured her

breasts fully. Funny – he'd never considered girls might need to do that.

She picked up her dress and then hesitated, the garment dangling in her hand. She chewed on her lower lip a second then turned to him, a slightly curious and baffled expression on her face.

"That's a rather unique… um… mating call you got there." His heart lurched into his throat and as the wave of pleasure receded, he thought he might just throw it up. *Oh no…*

And he'd otherwise been *so* careful!

He could say nothing, paralysed as he was, and it seemed she took his silence for offence and hastened to reassure him, compassion etching her brow:

"Not that there's anything wrong with it, I didn't mean that… just I've never really heard that sort of thing before… but you know, it's a wonderful world full of variety out there…" she was speaking rapidly, seemingly concerned she might've irreparably wounded his fragile virginal ego whilst at the same time convincing herself the *noise* wasn't so out of the ordinary. He felt relief and managed a weak grin she couldn't see.

"'S cool. Just feels like the right way to express myself. It's a compliment really!"

She smiled at him, clearly relieved and then slipped back into her dress and zipped it up, kicking out her stiletto heels and stepping into them as she did so. She straightened, smoothing her hair back over her ears, beaming at him.

"Hope that was what you were looking for, honey."

He swallowed, and his heart went back down. "Thank you, V-Vivienne. That – that was very special." And a warm, wonderful relief overcame him, pushing a great exhalation from his lungs.

It wasn't until after she'd gone he realised she'd forgotten the flowers.

Focus

Author's Note:

Yeah, it's been awhile. Maybe some of you remember me?

Winny

P.S. Thanks for the beta read, Bee. I hope you are having a happy birthday!

Chapter 19 - Focus

Michelangelo had been caught up in the sharing of his story, telling it with his usual charm and vivid attention to detail. Throughout this oration he was only aware of Splinter and Don in the vaguest sense: he knew they were hanging on his every word.

Only as he reached the conclusion – ending on the poignant and heartfelt note of his forgotten bouquet – did Mike think to consider how his family members might have responded to such an honest tale.

Donatello was staring at him from his adjacent seat on the battered couch. Mike's gaze slid reluctantly aside to check Master Splinter's reaction.

Splinter wasn't staring, but he was pacing in front of them with apparent agitation. His tail thrashed against the hem of his kimono. Never a good sign.

"Y-you promised I wouldn't get in trouble!" he piped defensively. Unlike his last big confession, this time he hadn't goofed off or sugar-coated anything in relating his experience with the call girl. He'd told it to them straight, leaving out nothing. Big mistake, apparently!

It was Donatello who broke the weighted silence. "You were running Cowabunga Carl jobs *behind my back* and *pocketing* the extra funds?" he complained.

Their father paused in front of Don and lashed out with an open palm, giving his head a corrective smack. "THAT is what you take from Michelangelo's story?"

"Wha-aat?" It was a harmless blow, but the other turtle's fingers lifted to run over the spot reflexively. " *Six-hundred dollars* , Master Splinter! And he didn't even get to -"

"Enough," Splinter's low tone was much more dangerous than if he had shouted. Donatello hunched his shoulders and wisely shut up.

Mike swallowed hard and dredged up a pathetic smile. His father's teeth were bared instinctively, struggling to govern what looked like a furious temper. "You promised," Michelangelo pointed out again, for good measure.

"I did," Splinter said, stroking his beard and glowering at the floor. "Michelangelo, I am true to my word. You are not in any trouble for your... your honesty. But never will you take such a risk again while you live in this lair. Do you understand me?"

" *Hai, sensei* ," Mike agreed softly, without reservation. Vivienne had taught him enough to sate his most urgent curiosity, short of actually doing the deed with someone. He would respect his father's wishes and bide his time until that special day arrived. Which it had to. Right?

"Wait, wait. Are we, uh," Donatello cleared his throat. "Are you officially forbidding us from paying for sex?"

Mike and Splinter both looked at him, startled by the question.

"I'd just like to be clear on the matter," he went on, stiffly defensive and blushing furiously. "The subject hasn't been broached, prior to

today, and-"

"To you, I have made no promises," Master Splinter growled, causing his son to grimace and fall silent. Black eyes flicked between both sons, trying to determine which son was more deserving of a lecture. He finally settled on Don, much to Michelangelo's relief. Their sensei drew a steadying breathe and seemed to force a more gentle approach. "Donatello," he began again, speaking more slowly. "Would you care to explain the measures you took to maintain the secrecy and security of the Hamato clan? Surely my most cautious son would take such measures." Donatello opened his mouth to speak, but wasn't given time to answer. Splinter's lecture was not finished. "After all, I may have reasons to disapprove of what Michelangelo did – primarily because he took too many risks without consulting me. But he also put extra effort into remaining hidden. Your brother showed remarkable restraint and forethought in both the planning and the execution of his…" the old rat paused to cough politely. "His adventure."

"Really?" Mike beamed hopefully.

Splinter shot him a stern look that clearly told him not to push it. "Even so, it will not happen again! The next girl may not be so tolerant or so kind. It is also illegal. We do still care about upholding the law, don't we?"

"Eh. Most of 'em?" Mike confessed with a grin.

"Most sounds generous," Don mumbled.

Mike's grin widened. " *Sensei* , there are *definitely* laws we care about upholding."

"Lawyer wording. I like it." Don presented a fist without looking up, and the pair bumped knuckles.

"That is quite enough, you two. Though it does please me to see you both getting along." Splinter hemmed into his whiskers. "Where was

I?"

"You wanted to hear about my stealth and safety measures," Don admitted without enthusiasm.

Splinter took his time settling into the arm chair opposite the couch, folding his legs into an elegant lotus pose. He took another slow, focusing breath before prompting, "Go on, then."

Don inserted a false note of cheer that did not completely disguise his bitterness over being lectured. "You'll be glad to know that I was one-hundred percent safe. Stealth was not even called for! Everything was over the table, off-planet, and completely legal. In most cases the participants were artificial intelligence, enhanced with creative use of projected matter."

"In most cases," Splinter repeated pointedly. He stared down the end of his nose in a way that demanded further elaboration.

"What can I say, Master Splinter?" Don gave a small shrug. "I touched on this last night to some extent, but Renet - she likes to party when she's off-duty. Since her last few promotions especially, or any time she gets a care package from her extremely wealthy parents, she always has credits to burn."

"And you do not feel that I should be concerned by your participation in these wild parties?"

"No, father. I don't." Don locked gazes with their father to give him a very rare look. His eyes were challenging and bright, for all that his tone remained reasonable. "It was just sex. It wasn't dangerous or even very complicated. Relationships, on the other hand..." He seemed to scrap what he was about to say mid-sentence, perhaps considering the two hard-core romantics that were his audience. He dropped his eyes and breathed out a sigh, and it seemed to Mike that all the aggression slumped out of his posture. "Honestly, Master Splinter," he mumbled, sounding tired. "We're talking about pleasant, scantily-clad professionals who wouldn't know which galaxy Earth

resides in, so the chances of them finding our lair are pretty slim. After all that I've been through, I'm telling you, these encounters should be the least of your worries."

Splinter studied him intently.

"Duuuude!" Mike whined abruptly, unable to bear their rocky silence any longer. He thumped the side of Don's leg with one fist. "You could have been taking me to space parties this whole time!"

"Not really, Mikey." Don didn't look at him, leaning forward and massaging a wrinkle of flesh between his eyes. "It would be complicated. To even get through security at Renet's events, you'd need a - a sort of trans-dimensional passport. And a level of clearance which is normally never issued to someone from a native planet whose technology is as primitive as Earth's - not without really good references, proof of work, something like that. I don't know how much more I'm even allowed to explain."

Michelangelo scowled, but before he could voice any more protest, he felt his phone vibrate and instinctively flipped it open. He expected to see some update from Leo or possibly one of his tagger friends. The incoming text was from a contact he didn't recognize.

FM: THAT'S FUNNY. I'M FILLING OUT THE PAPERWORK HE IS TALKING ABOUT RIGHT NOW.

Mike frowned and quickly thumbed a reply, keeping the shell cell close to his leg. He had a lot of practice at stealth texting, thanks to Gelica and the rest of his crew, but there was too much focus on him right now to get away with anything besides the customary reply. It was the reply they were always supposed to give when they weren't sure who was on the other end of any unknown communication coming into the lair. This was one of Donatello's strictest rules and he definitely didn't want another lecture about OPSEC, which had been his punishment the last two times this rule had been broken.

LM: Sorry think u got the wrong number

The response was instantaneous. The phone didn't vibrate or play any notification sound as it should have done. It just appeared on the screen. Also, he had no idea why it labelled his own text as 'LM'. Mike was so spooked by these observations that he abandoned stealth entirely and brought the phone closer to his face, drinking in the glowing words on the screen.

FM: I DON'T THINK SO, LITTLE MIKE.

FM: NOW PAY ATTENTION TO SPLINTER AND DON BEFORE ONE OF THEM CONFISCATES YOUR PHONE.

FM: TELL THEM YOU'LL SILENCE THE PHONE BEFORE ONE OF THEM HAS TO ORDER YOU.

FM: DO WHAT I SAY, AND THEN HANG TIGHT BECAUSE I PROMISE YOU

FM: THINGS ARE ABOUT TO GET WAY MORE AWESOME.

Mike snapped the phone shut quickly. Sure enough, Don and Splinter had already honed in on what he was doing. He could read their disapproval in the flattening of Splinter's ears and the set of Don's jaw. Mike's stomach was still doing sloppy flips in his gut, but somehow he held it together. "Sorry, wrong number. I silenced it," he mumbled, shoving the shell cell back into his belt holster.

The tension in their faces lessened immediately. Donatello had been sitting hunched forward on the sofa, but leaned back against the cushions and drawled, "Wrong number my tail. Tell me that wasn't your pregnant not-quite-girlfriend."

Mike sprung to his feet with mostly faked offense and stabbed a warning finger at his brother. "Listen, asshole. That's... a-a sadly accurate description!" He raked his fingers over his face and 'arrrgghhed' into his palms, holding the pose for max dramedy. He sucked in a breath, blew it out, and dropped his hands back to his sides. "Okay. I'm over it! So, here's a crazy notion. How about

everybody *focus?* Because a little bit ago, Master Splinter, you were like, 'where was I?' And the answer should've been," He thumped the back of his hand into an open palm here for emphasis. " *You were about to give us the sex talk.* You didn't bring us in here to lecture us about all the crazy shit we been up to, how risky it was, or NONE of that. Really, we're supposed to be all:" He launched into song at this point, his whole body jumping to the beat. "LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX, BAY-BEE! LET'S TALK ABOUT YOU AND ME!"

As he sang, Mike gripped one of his chucks like an imaginary microphone and held out to Don to invite participation. There was a time when they had shared a love for cheesy hits from the 80s and 90s.

Donatello didn't look like he wanted to join in, almost too cool for school, but Mike's energy was infectious. He never made a sound, but his head bobbed gently to the beat and his mouth moved to shape the rest of the refrain. "Let's talk about all the good things, and the bad things, that will be. Let's talk about sex."

Safe Sex

Author's Note:

After waiting four years, y ou guys deserve more than one chapter. Princessebee beta read this one too. Thanks, and enjoy!

Winny

Chapter 19: Safe Sex

Michelangelo spread his hands to finish with a flourish. Donatello gave him a look that was fond, if not quite a smile.

Splinter was silent for several beats before admitting, "As in Shakespeare, my jester speaks wisdom. Also, Donatello, I must concede to you that maintaining control of this lesson has proven most difficult."

"Well, thanks for that," Don mumbled, genuinely appreciative but unable to completely abandon sarcasm.

"But we're good! We're gonna be good now." Mike bounced his legs like a hyperactive kid on the day after Halloween. "Go for teacher. Let's do this."

Splinter plucked Don's original lesson plan off the small, battered coffee table and studied it. The other turtles waited patiently for him to speak.

"Donatello," he said finally. "It does seem to me that we could advance to a later chapter, considering the, ah, experience revealed between the two of you."

"It's supposed to build on itself..." Don defended his work wearily, more out of habit than for any good reason. Abruptly, he seemed to realize he didn't care anymore. "Never mind. Do whatever you want with it."

"Builds on itself. Huh." The old rat dropped his eyes back to the list and tapped the page absently. "Where is the climax?"

"Oh! We already covered the Big O, *sensei* ," Mike supplied helpfully. He sat up straighter and explained, "I mean, we talked about what it sounds like. And in my experience, Don's one-hundred percent right. Girls freak out a little when they aren't expecting it. Uh, did you have anything else to say about orgasms, D?"

Don had already face palmed, and now he peeked through his fingers to flash a grin at his brother. "Yeah. I mean, of course there's more to consider than what it sounds like. But Mikey, I don't think Master Splinter was talking about that kind of climax."

"Indeed not," the rodent agreed, setting the battered piece of paper back down on the coffee table and readjusting the angle of his chair before returning to the lotus pose. This new position allowed him to face them both squarely. Splinter had used this armchair many times before when conducting informal lessons. Somehow today it did not feel like he sat in a strong position of authority.

Still, Splinter intended to meet this uncomfortable challenge head on. Don's insistence that they follow a particular lesson plan struck him as overly structured to the point of detriment. He could think of no better role to serve right now than mediator. The key was just to get them talking honestly about these topics which, until now, had been all but taboo. It had been a grave mistake on his part.

Perhaps it was even cowardice.

Oh yes, Splinter was more determined than ever to correct these errors. He gestured towards the page with a flick of his long, grizzled moustaches. "Donatello, if I asked you to rank these topics for me by

order of importance - could you do that? Out of all these crucial things you would like for them to hear, what is at the top of the list?"

Don looked off at some fixed point in the distance. He answered without inflection and didn't need to glance at the list. "Safe Sex."

"Really?" Splinter's fluffy eyebrows drew together. He picked the list back up and finally glanced at Don. "It would not have been my first guess," he admitted.

Michelangelo's grin was just as baffled. "Just throwin' it out there. But, you guys DO realize that I'm not Angel's baby-daddy, right?"

Donatello's reply was vaguely amused and patronizing, "No, Mikey. Unless we're willing to buy female turtles from the pet store, slather them with a near-identical concentration of mutagen somehow, and then wait around for fifteen years minimum while the young ladies ripen to maturity..."

"Gross! We'd be like twice their age, assuming they would even wanna!"

"Exactly. So let's just come to terms with the fact that fatherhood is going to be a biological impossibility."

"Nonsense," the old rat firmly disagreed. " *Impregnation* , perhaps. But a would-be father can always adopt."

"Fair enough," Donatello conceded ruefully. "But if you are harboring a secret hope for grandchildren, *sensei* ... please leave me out of it."

"Sooo... safe sex? I still don't get it." Michelangelo's blue eyes widened. "Shit, dude. Did you catch some kind of space AIDS?"

"What? No!" Don recoiled visibly at his brother's word choice.

"Well, THAT'S good. But you're worried the rest of us will get crudded up? Hey wait, does that mean condoms really ARE a no-

go? Because Vivienne showed me that thing with her boot, but I gotta tell you - I still got my doubts."

"Standard latex condoms? I don't have much experience with them, to be honest. I tried one on when I was a kid. Not a used one! It was still in the package when I found it. And it *did* fit, but it wasn't exactly comfortable." His older son looked mildly embarrassed. "I think that would be the case even if you got a hold of an extra, extra large sized one. Keep in mind, I still had some growing to do, but even then it was less about the size and more about the shape. From the encounter you described, I highly doubt that escort saw you in 'full bloom', if you know what I mean."

Splinter certainly did not, but couldn't bring himself to point it out. The conversation flowed easily between his boys while he grappled to keep up.

"No way, dude. Wasn't even close. Wrong time of year, right? I'd have to jack it real hard for that to happen."

Donatello's eyes widened and flicked toward Splinter to check for a reaction. He was *not* ready to give them one.

Mike carried on, shameless or oblivious - it was hard to say. "I was feeling pretty shy, right? And she was bein' totes gentle. Which was fine. Super sexy, even! Did I mention she was amazing? Because she was. If I had to do it over, I wouldn't change a thing."

"I believe you," Donatello flashed a wistful smile. "And there's nothing wrong with gentle. Gentle is almost always what I'm aiming for."

"Unless it's the end of spring," Mike interjected.

"Well," Don gave a depreciative smirk, "Obviously."

Again, obvious would not have been his first description. His sons, however, clearly shared an understanding. Splinter listened carefully,

unobtrusively, even as it occurred to him that he was learning more from this lesson than either of his pupils.

Donatello glanced at Splinter and made a nominal effort to include him. "Sorry if we're digressing." He reached across the coffee table and tapped his fingers on the outline. "This topic would have been covered only briefly, under 'Two stages of ejaculation.' It's nothing new to the four of us, but I did want to point out that humans only have the one. Rats too, I should think."

"Correct," Splinter agreed. At least that was a fact he could speak to with certainty.

"Many years ago the four of us actually got in an argument about this, whether or not the first stage should even count as a true ejaculation. The discharge doesn't actually have much in the way of sperm count. It's mostly just our natural lubricant. My hypothesis is that our bodies know it on an instinctive level when we aren't properly mounted, and it reacts to, ahh, facilitate?"

Splinter mused upon his son's ability to wear the tone of a scientist like a suit of armor. Donatello was at ease addressing any number of embarrassing topics with his brothers or even his father, so long as he could include words like 'hypothesis'.

Michelangelo held up a palm to halt his brother's scientific speculations. "Give it up, dude. You lost three-to-one. And nobody cares what creepy stuff you figured out with that microscope Splinter gave you for Christmas. It feels like cumming, so it counts as cumming." He paused to enjoy Donatello's dark green blush, then continued breezily, "Anyway, don't feel bad that you just have the one kind of orgasm, Master Splinter. You are not missing anything."

Donatello did not speak up openly in disagreement, but glanced at his brother and mumbled under his breath, 'Seriously?"

"Sure! Mostly I don't bother to go all the way. I think I'm too impatient. Too lazy, maybe. Getting that worked up outta season takes some

dedication. Not to mention WAY too much clean-up afterwards."

Splinter was simultaneously amused and disgusted with this reminder of spring time messes, and worked hard to maintain a facial expression that betrayed neither inappropriate reaction.

His other son remained dead serious. He set a hand on Michelangelo's arm and implored. "Mikey. Please listen to me, because this is very important. When it comes to the real deal - actual penetration with another person, especially someone you're really into - you won't always get a choice."

Mike's playfulness snuffed out immediately. Splinter watched a sober understanding pass between them.

Don retrieved his hand, folding it in his lap. "And something you just said relates back to your earlier question about condoms. They probably weren't designed to handle the duration - or rather, the sheer volume - of our discharge. But I suppose none of it's relevant. This lesson, it was never about avoiding pregnancy or STIs."

The younger turtle's face scrunched, transparent as always in his distress and empathy. "Then let's hear it. Lay it on me, bro. You don't gotta dance around it."

"I'm not dancing, I swear. I just didn't want to make any assumptions - I had no idea how experienced anyone was, so I thought I would start w-with the basics and – crap, I probably should have pencilled in some bullet points for you to follow, Master Splinter. Look, I'll summarize. My interpretation of 'safe sex' involves - um, a lot of bondage. None of the cheap stuff they sell in sex shops. All of that is mostly for play. I like to use police-grade handcuffs and heavy duty zip-ties. I believe in safe words, but they aren't always reliable once things have progressed past a certain point. And, ah, I keep tranquilizer darts in reach of the bed."

Mike's eyes widened. "Whoa."

"Not because I have a kink for any of these things, but I rely on them out of necessity. Safe sex is actually about, ah. Um," Donatello's confidence had been leaking out slowly as the explanation of safe sex continued, deflating and stumbling over his words, until it finally ran out altogether. Now he floundered painfully, twisting his hands together, drowning.

"Not harming your partner," their master deduced gently.

"Yes," Donatello bowed his head. "Precisely."

Mike looked between them, an awful feeling pooling in his gut. He took his brother by both shoulders and exclaimed, "Okay, you gotta spell it out for me, D. Are we compatible or not?"

"No," Donatello sounded choked by the words. "N-not one-hundred percent."

"Not one-hundred..." Mike repeated, blinking. "What percent, then?"

"I-I don't know! How do you enumerate something like that?" Donatello shook off his brother's grip, whirling to face the white board where the chart labeled *Stages of (HUMAN) Intimacy* was still being projected. He uncapped a wide-tipped black marker and fiercely blacked out the final item on the list, which was 'Intercourse'. "There," he practically snarled. "Is that clear enough for you?"

Michelangelo stared at him, struck dumb.

Watching all the blood drain from his little brother's face had a marked effect on Donatello. He pursed his mouth firmly as he felt his lower lip start to quaver. His hands became clumsy, fumbling to cap the marker and setting it back into its cradle with an unintentionally sharp clack. "I - I'm sorry. This Talk isn't going at all how I planned. I didn't mean to - I don't know why. I." Donatello trailed off as his chest seized, like he had run out of air.

In the next moment, Mike's arms were thrown fiercely around him. Master Splinter rose from his chair and moved closer, laying a thin, clawed hand on Donatello's shoulder to display his wordless support.

"I get it, bro. I hear you. This stuff isn't easy to talk about. It's not easy for me to hear, either. But I'm listening. And I'm with you. Okay?"

Donatello hid his face against Mike's shell and shivered. "Just - promise me. You'll be careful."

"You got it, brother" Michelangelo agreed sincerely. "Whatever you say. I won't do anything that isn't safe, I swear it."

"Thank you," he whispered. He was the first to tear free and Michelangelo didn't try to hang on, allowing his troubled brother the space to look away and compose himself. Donatello was the least tactile of Splinter's sons, even more so than Raphael. Michelangelo knew his brother well enough to respect this.

"So... damn. It really doesn't fit?" Michelangelo gave a sad, short laugh. "I was kind of hoping, well, since they pop babies out of there… I was thinking, at least it's not as big as a baby!"

Donatello's reply was sober and unsmiling, but also not unkind. "Mikey, think about it. The widest part of a newborn is the head, and it's only about this big around." He demonstrated the average size by forming a small circle with his fingers.

"No way. Their heads look way bigger than that on TV."

"They do not use newborn infants on television or in the movies, Michelangelo."

"Master Splinter's right. I think there are laws about it. They have to use older babies. But think back, Mikey. Do you remember when we were ten and found that abandoned baby while we were dumpster diving?"

"Sure. Master Splinter bundled him up in his robe, and we turned a wooden crate into a cradle, and left him on the steps of the police station." Michelangelo frowned as he recalled, "I was pretty pissed because Leo wouldn't let me hold him."

"Can you blame him? You said you wanted to keep it!"

Mike shrugged. "Yeah, well, I was ten! Plus, I was convinced I could do a way better job of snuggling him than you guys. I was sure I could get the little guy to calm down if you'd only give me a chance. But, anyway, I guess I sort of figured that baby was, like, a preemie? I thought that's what you meant when you said he was born sick."

"He *was* sick," Donatello explained solemnly. "He was suffering from exposure. I also suspect he was born addicted to drugs due to some of the brief seizures I observed and the way he never stopped crying. But I assure you, that was a full term baby. He wouldn't have survived very long in that dumpster otherwise. Premature babies can't leave the hospital right away. They rely on heat and need help breathing, so they're hooked up to CPAP machines and kept in little incubators..."

"Oh, man. Nobody told me he was having seizures. I thought he was crying 'cause he was scared of us and missed his mama."

"I only told my concerns to Master Splinter. I didn't want to worry you guys. There was no way to verify my suspicions, and... Raph and Leo were already so upset."

"I suspect that I memorized the shape of that little one's head better than any of you…" Splinter's gaze had been unfocused with a haze of memories as he said this, but abruptly he gave himself a shake and focused on Donatello. "And I have observed the four of you well enough, even by accidental glimpses. All four of you are - impressive, surely. But from what I have seen, none of you has more girth than the head of a newborn child."

Donatello's lip curled, a slight cringe in his apology. "Then you didn't glimpse us at the right moment, *sensei* . You aren't going to see it with the petals fully extended when we're in the shower or taking a leak."

"Really, dude? Petals? Full bloom? C'mon, man! That's my *junk* you're talking about! You gotta knock it off with all these flower words. Especially around me and Raph. Maybe Leo appreciates it when someone besides him himself waxes poetic, but Raph is totally behind me on this one."

"I'm not trying to be sentimental, just facing facts. It's shaped like a flower."

"Raph says it's shaped like a mace. And what you just called petals, I think he calls those prongs."

Don's retort was wry and dripping. "Well, Raph is *wrong* . Not to mention overly concerned with machismo. Truthfully, textbooks usually refer to these bits as appendages, and I refuse to call them that. Talk about unflattering. It sounds like part of some slimy horror from the black bog. Anyway, maces are round at the end. We are concave like a flower."

"Sorry, bro. We can put it to another vote if you really want to. But I happen to be an expert at naming things, and I am here to tell you: the names Raph came up with for our wangs are at least twenty percent cooler."

Donatello tilted his head. "Twenty percent? That's… oddly specific."

"Oh, it's a Brony thing," Michelangelo sighed dismissively. "You wouldn't understand."

The other turtle rolled his eyes, unwilling to be baited into another hidden sales pitch from his little brother about why he should be watching a nostalgia reboot about colorful cartoon ponies that originally aired before they were born. "Listen, I'm not trying to

impress men with it. Girls actually *like* flowers! The last thing I need is a naming convention for my phallus that makes it sound even more intimidating than it already is. But you guys can name it whatever the hell you want. Call your dick Twilight Sparkles for all I care, Mikey."

"Ha!" Michelangelo barked a laugh. "Good one, D. Maybe I will. It's almost the right color!"

"The POINT is, the next time you manage to pop it all the way open maybe you could try to shake off the euphoria for a second and get a better look at it."

The younger turtle blinked. "You're right. You know, I never really thought to stop and check it out while it was happening. That's kinda weird, right?"

"I don't think it's weird at all. When I'm in that state, rational thought is almost impossible without a big effort on my part. It's easier with practice, so it might be worth your while to try. But it's never going to be something you want to rely on. Always use restraints. I can't stress that enough."

Splinter looked between them, bewildered. "Slow down, please. Donatello, I thought I understood the dangers you spoke of last night. But some of this is new to me."

The boys glanced at each other and exchanged a look that was almost ashamed. This was especially worrisome and intriguing coming from Michelangelo. His youngest son had earned a reputation for being shameless about sex, particularly during that dreaded time they spent quarantined to the lair, enduring the worst of their annual mating season. As the turtles matured, it was mutually agreed that Splinter should plan a convenient pilgrimage during these weeks. After all, there was nothing he could do to advise them or make their situation more comfortable. He could not even address their woes without inflicting undue humiliation. It seemed only natural to retreat from the lair and give them the privacy they so desired. It

had been decided that Leonardo was better equipped than himself to keep the peace during these times. His eldest understood first-hand what his brothers were going through, and he was the most capable of maintaining his calm demeanor and unshakeable self-discipline.

But had that been the right decision, after all? If he had stayed, been more persistent, perhaps he would already understand all of this. For the first time, Splinter doubted the wisdom of their long-standing arrangement.

"Michelangelo. Maybe you can help me understand this. All those hours you spent during the spring time, barricaded in your room… making noise." His thin hands gestured helplessly. "Naturally I assumed you were in there - getting to know yourself, as it were!"

"Uh... yeah?" Michelangelo ventured warily.

"My son," Splinter's eyes grew large and imploring. "How can you not be sure of the *shape* of it? How can ANY male person not be familiar with... with every angle and inch of himself?"

"I dunno," Michelangelo mumbled, dropping his eyes and squirming a bit under his father's gaze. "We just, we kind of lose it, Master Splinter. It's so intense - *too* intense! It's kind of like how I imagine it must feel to be stupidly high on drugs I would never do, like injecting a bunch of cocaine or something. Usually when it happens, I can't get up off my hands and knees. I can't do *anything* except thrash around, and - and *feel* it. When I wake up, I won't exactly know why my legs got so bruised or how I broke the bed frame."

Donatello followed his brother's detailed explanation with a slow, expressionless nod. His own summation used fewer words, but they sent a chill down Splinter's spine. "We go into a frenzy."

Several moments passed. None of them spoke.

"I see," Master Splinter said at last. "I am sorry. I… did not realize."

"No sweat, *sensei* . We don't really like to bring it up." Michelangelo tugged on his bandana tails, sheepish and a bit forlorn. "I wasn't bein' honest earlier when I said it was about laziness. Truth is, it freaks me out. I never want it to happen, unless it's mating season. And then I really *need* it to happen. A lot. But the rest of the time, I hate it."

"I... don't hate it," Donatello confessed very softly.

The turtles' eyes locked, but only briefly. It was as though Michelangelo's concern for his brother became too apparent and chased Don's gaze back to the floor.

Whatever Mike had seen there, he opted not to pursue it. He looked back up at their father with renewed vigor. "Oh, hey! *Sensei* , do you remember the coffee table we had before this one? The nice one that disappeared last spring? And you were mad when you got back because nobody would tell you where it went or even whose fault it was?"

"Yes," the rat agreed slowly.

"Oh, wow. You're actually going to come clean about that?" Donatello's hand lifted to cover pending laughter.

"Might as well. Here goes..." Mike hung his head and sighed. "They were covering for me, Master Splinter. It was all my fault. Nobody really knew how to tell you this, but I—" He squeezed his eyes shut and loudly confessed, "I'm pretty sure I fucked the coffee table!"

A beat of silence, then another.

"Ah," Splinter finally said. Because really, what else could he say?

"To death!" Michelangelo added in an apologetic stage whisper.

Invested

Chapter 20: Invested

Jonas had been reclining comfortably at his work station, platform boots propped on the desk, the very picture of nonchalance. But now he yanked his feet to the floor and stared at the third sphere, which he was – for lack of new instructions – still faithfully monitoring. *Coffee table? What in the…?*

Yet another annoying indicator that his translators might be on the fritz. It would not do. This was the worst possible time for damaged listening skills. The blue-skinned alien considered the slender glass tube still dangling from his fingers, then drained the remaining electric-green contents in a single toss and pitched the empty vial onto the desk in front of him. Research notes and neglected temporal theory homework were shoved aside carelessly. Retrieving a thin, dark purple tablet from amidst his clutter, Jonas powered on the display and lazily traced a series of commands onto the glyph pad with his fingertip to specify some basic parameters: current galaxy, Orion spur, the planet Earth, Common English files current to the third millennium. He filtered slang and dialect data with a generous location-based radius around the Hamato family's home. "Coffee table" was his primary search term, but he tacked on a few variants such as "coffeetable" and "coffee-table" before executing the query.

There weren't many new results. The DataBank took less than a second before displaying a series of glyphs which let him know the package was complete and ready for uplink. The leather-clad alien pulled a retractable cable out of the side of the tablet and shoved black spikes of hair aside, fitting the plug into one of three neural ports situated near the base of his skull. He closed his eyes and waited a moment for the uplink to overwrite any files that were unique or newer than what was already in his head.

The language patch left him none the wiser. He sat blinking, skimming through the new knowledge, but none of it fit the context any better than the standard definition. Which was – a common piece of furniture. *Maybe there's a hole in the table where containers of this stimulant beverage are placed, and he… ugh.*

Jonas made a face and halted that line of disturbing mental imagery before it could proceed any further. A ping hit his cortex through the uplink, followed by a friendly reminder that the DataBank could stream any number of coffee table examples from image files syphoned from Earth's global network. Did he want to proceed with the new package? "NOPE! Nope, nope, I'm good." He reached back quickly to disconnect the neural jack, letting it retract back into the tablet with a metallic 'zip'.

Jonas gave a short laugh and shook his head, slouching back in his chair. "It's a good thing we're friends, Hamato. Because right now I got more dirt on you and your family than I ever cared to gather."

"Is that so?" asked a flat voice from somewhere behind him.

In his shock, Jonas lost his grip on the tablet and let it fall onto the desk with a clatter. He spun the chair around, eyes wide. "Oh! Greetings, shadowy intruder! Or, should I say… hi, boss."

"You – think you recognize me?"

The figure standing in his workroom flickered and shone with a strange, disorienting light. It was a light that didn't *cast* light. Other shadows in the room remained untouched, yet the brightness was eye-stabbing any time Jonas tried to focus on him. It was rapidly becoming difficult to even look in his direction, let alone judge his reactions.

"We haven't met. And don't worry, there's no fault with that sexy concealment spell you're strutting. Or is it tech? I honestly can't…" Jonas risked another direct glance, his curiosity getting the better of

him, and instantly regretted it. "Ahh… *sikd! Guvidin-ka.* My poor retinas."

"It's an ancient mystic art... well. My little twist on it. Try not to look too closely."

"No kidding! Wow." His eyes were watering heavily now, tears mixing with silver cosmetics and tracking metallic streaks down either cheek. "So, yes. Figured you might drop by, considering your best surveillance tools are here…" He waved his fingers to indicate the row of illuminated spheres resting on gilded stands, though at the moment they all looked like one big glowing blur. "Another thing, boss. If you really wanted to fool me, you probably shouldn't have addressed me in your native tongue."

"How can you be sure that I did?"

"Just a hunch. But I'm pretty familiar with the tech, and – I don't know. Listening to you *feels* a lot like listening to Hamato."

"That's interesting. Maybe you're not the idiot people say you are."

"Heh." Jonas rubbed his eyes some more. Now his hands were glittery too. "I don't know. Give it time?"

"You're clever enough. But you've got another thing coming if you think I'm letting you keep those spheres. You're Renet's lackey. Why did you stay behind, if not to spy for her?"

"I didn't want to transfer. Never did! Now she's pissed at me, but I don't really care. The 79th is my *home* . My friends are here, my contacts, all my ladies except for one! There's also my biochem lab, my band, all my favorite venues... I could go on. You know, Lord Simultaneous was lecturing me just the other day, something about how I don't give shits about things? And I don't know how fair that is, but it did get me thinking. If I shuffled off to the 42nd Layer with them, it would become true! I would give zero shits."

"So that's why you stayed? You're invested in this layer – and this verse, in particular?"

"And so are you, right? I'm hoping? Because dusting for the Mistress has been fun and all, but lately she's made a real mess of the place. Maybe you've noticed. M'here to tell you, she's mostly invested in herself."

He must have slurred his words – or maybe it was all the vials, blackened pipes, and empty injection canisters lying in plain sight. The migraine-inducing shadow made a scoffing sound. "Yeah, but what am *I* supposed to do with you? Are you even *sober* right now?"

Jonas laughed. "Did you miss the part where I'm a biochemist with a band? I'm never sober. But I think you'll find me a very useful minion." He rose, moving toward the vanity to fix his eye make-up. In spite of what he had just said, he was graceful and steady on his feet as he crossed the room.

He didn't look back, but sensed that the visitor trailed after him. "Useful how? I don't need chemicals to do what I've got planned. I don't need chemical enhancement for anything."

"Mm-hmm," the Omatran was sorting through tiny bottles and compacts, setting certain ones aside. "As I've heard Hamato say, think outside the box a little. Could you use an air-born neurotoxin that would pacify an angry riot, or stop a panicked crowd from trampling one another? Maybe a truth-speaking injection for interrogations? Or any number of regenerative drugs that would seem miraculous to most cultures, third Earth *most definitely* included."

"Oh yeah? Can you regenerate *this?* "

The terrible brain-melting light that had been lurking in his peripheral vision suddenly guttered and went out. Jonas settled for a quick swipe with a mostly clean scrap of cloth to wipe the smeared cosmetics off his cheeks, then turned slowly on his stool, taking in

his first proper look at his visitor. He was more fashionable than his teenage counterpart. His black hooded cape was lined in a striking shade of orange. The rest of his body armor was dark green and black except for a small metallic orange "T" emblazoned on his belt buckle.

What the new boss wanted to regenerate was immediately apparent.

"Oh… stars, why would you WANT to?" Jonas was on his feet and closing the distance in a heartbeat. He hunched down, bringing his face in close and tilting his head to get a better look at the terrapin's sleek, cybernetic arm. "This hardware, it's – *beautiful,* boss! I'm seeing… Federation materials, but this articulation is pure Utromian… huh!" He straightened up and confided, "The engineer who installed this for you is a master. I don't want to think about what it must have cost."

"It cost me nothing." The cloaked turtle's clear blue eyes went bittersweet, the faint wrinkles around his eyes deepening. He glanced over his shoulder, towards the viewing spheres. "It will be a gift."

"Oh." The Omatran's mouth twisted ruefully. "I really should have realized."

The terrapin turned back to Jonas and asked again, more sharply, "Can you regenerate the arm or not?"

"Can you show me? Does it detach?"

"Of course." He started to reach for the shoulder joint with his other arm, but Jonas held up silver-dusted fingers to halt him.

"Wait. Stop," the biochemist grimaced. "There's no point. Hamato is plenty interested in Omatran tech already. His understanding of our capabilities will only grow. And if this was the best solution he had for you… I'm sorry, boss. My guess is that the injury healed too long ago and we didn't have your DNA mapped properly. He probably knew

you'd be able to use the one he built for you with more finesse than the imperfect replacement my people could grow."

The hooded figure let his good arm fall back to his side. "Well, it was worth a shot. Been a real bitch finding people who know enough to do maintenance on it, ever since…"

The terrapin's gaze was drawn back to the sphere. For a time, he just stared at the image of his younger self sitting on a battered couch next to their long-lost brother.

Jonas put a hand on the terrapin's armored plastron and looked at him intently. "Don't worry, boss. This time you're going to save him."

That earned a fierce smile. "You're damned right, we are."

"We?" Jonas retrieved his hand and broke into a lazy smile. "So you *are* going to hire me."

"I suppose we could do worse for a minion. But you do realize I'm not the boss, right? He is."

Jonas shrugged. "Sure, technically. But you're his foreshadow, aren't you? The Mistress has one too. Met her a couple times. She's a spooky, white-robed Goddess. Flies around. Very serious. Scares the pants off me! But you seem all right. And the new kid's going to need your help. He is not exactly prepared for this."

The foreshadow smiled gently. "He'll acclimate. He's a fast learner… and he's always wanted super powers."

"Hey, want to hear another great thing about having me on your team? I'm probably the only one who can give you the inside scoop about how badly we've fucked up. I don't know how much you've already heard from the council, but I guarantee you - they do *not* know everything. And if you think Renet will tell you the truth, or even Hamato, you're sadly mistaken."

"You would turn on Renet so completely?" The terrapin frowned uncertainly. "Then what's to keep you from betraying me?"

Jonas boldly met his eyes. "Please listen closely, boss. If you fuck up my verse any more than it has already been fucked, I *will* betray you."

"Deal."

The cloaked turtle grinned, sticking out his hand – the flesh one – and they shook on it. Jonas could tell from the grip that he was insanely strong.

"Anyway, boss, I think we'll work well enough together. This new kid's a trip. I've been keeping tabs on the family since this whole thing started, and – I don't know. I think I like this little table fucker!"

"NO," the turtle boomed, suddenly imposing. "Never again. You will refer to us as Lord Titan."

"Yes sir, Lord Titan sir!" Jonas thumped his chest in mock salute.

The stand-in Time Lord eyed him for another moment, then looked away with a self-depreciating grin. He shook his head slowly and muttered, "Four hundred god-damned years, and I *still* haven't lived that down…"

Subject Matter Expert

Chapter 21: Subject Matter Expert

Leonardo was leading more out of habit than any sense of duty or purpose. "Let's move," he had abruptly decided, and Raph had not questioned it. He'd hauled himself up and started plodding along beside him. Leo was vaguely grateful that Raph had not asked about their destination. He had no idea where they were heading – only that it wasn't home.

They walked for a time in comfortable silence, trudging side-by-side through ankle-deep sludge. The smell was terrible, but Raphael didn't seem to notice. Two years ago, Leo wouldn't have either. Daily access to fresh air had spoiled him. They were so far down right now that the afternoon light could barely penetrate.

"When do you think you're gonna tell 'em?" Raph asked at last.

It was easier to answer a question like that in near darkness. "Whenever I grow a pair," he muttered.

"That'll be awhile. Weren't you paying attention to any of that basic anatomy shit?" Raphael's elbow jabbed him playfully. "Fuck, maybe you DO need Don's class."

"Heh, I'll pass. Ignorance is bliss. Right?"

"Dunno if bliss is the right word," Raph pointed out bitterly. "Not for us."

"Good point. Ignorance is tolerable?"

"That'll do."

"So... can we talk about Renet for a second? Which, mind blown, by the way."

This earned side-eye from Donatello. "Depends," he said slowly. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, *first* I want to know when it started. Like, particularly, if it started during a certain forced vacation to another time that Master Splinter still refuses to let us tell him anything about."

"Ummmm," Don stalled, drawing the word out and tapping his fingers together. His gaze skated the room, maybe looking for an excuse that didn't exist. When he finally confessed, he sounded genuinely abashed. "Yes. Like minks." He looked away and tacked on, "Sorry."

Mike stabbed a finger at him, "Now that right there is some *bullshit* . We all made a pact not to start anything with her, Don. We swore a solemn oath!"

"Well, *technically* it had already started by the time we swore that oath," his brother defended lamely. "And she was the one who started it." A beat, as the inadequacy of his excuses sunk in. He rushed on, defensive in spite of being one-hundred percent guilty, "Look, it's not my fault that you guys didn't see through my lawyer wording."

"Neither is it their fault that you chose to use lawyer wording rather than speak the truth," Splinter felt obliged to point out.

"I suppose," Don agreed with a faint scowl. "Look, it was fun for a while cataloging all the local flora and fauna, but then I ran out of notebook paper. There was no internet, no technology whatsoever. And she was kind of in the same boat, cut off from her magic. In hindsight, I think it only happened because we were both *really bored,* okay? "

Mike's hands slashed the air in front of him. "Wait, wait, no. NOT OKAY, Don. Weren't you the one who came up with the idea of the

oath in the first place?"

"Mmm, no. I'm pretty sure that was Leo." Donatello had the nerve to point this out with a straight face.

"Riiight. But immediately *before* that, weren't you the one who was like," here Mike launched into a purposefully crappy Donatello impersonation: hunched over, wringing his hands, and speaking in a too-nasal voice. "You know, guys, I've been thinking! Spring is approaching and we need to consider how we are going to remain honorable in the presence of our female friend. Because I'm such a gentleman and a defender of women and it seems like the safe and noble thing to do! And then Leo's all," Mike pointed a 'bright idea' finger towards the ceiling and switched to his Leo voice, which was all commanding charisma and actually pretty good. "I've got an idea, guys. We'll swear a solemn oath!"

Don split a grin and threw his hands up. "ALL RIGHT! Okay? I'm a bastard. A devious bastard."

"But why, Don?!" Mike wailed with maximum drama.

" *Why?* " Donatello leaned forward to lock their gazes together. He held it for several beats, and when he finally spoke, his voice had softened with surprising sincerity. "Because it was new and fun and… God, we had *so much fun* during that time. I was pretty innocent back then. I thought that it *meant* something. That if we made it out of there alive, I would have someone. Can you blame me for not wanting to *share* her?"

Michelangelo just looked at him for a moment, caught completely off guard by the honest answer after so much deception. "Naw, dude," he finally said, dropping the attitude and deciding to be honest in turn. "Not even kinda."

"But then you wound up sharing her anyway," Splinter remarked with thoughtful sympathy. He was familiar with that part of the tale, having gleaned it from Donatello the previous night.

"Yes, but that was much later. At first, we just… went home. She became an official Time Mistress. And I didn't see or hear from her for almost two years."

Mike released the lip he had been biting. "That's… awful."

"I suppose," Don agreed wistfully. "But it was partly my fault. I made stupid romantic assumptions. I'm sure she would have cheerfully explained how things would proceed, if I had thought to ask." A trace of bitter irony twisted his lips as he thought about it. "Likely it just didn't occur to her. Consideration of other people is not really her strong suit."

Splinter frowned. "Here is what I do not understand. Only last night you spoke to me with trepidation at the idea that she was suddenly… I believe your words were, 'treating me like her boyfriend'. But it sounds as though there was once a time when that was precisely your desire. What changed?"

"I did," Donatello mumbled with undisguised bitterness. The other two looked at him expectantly. He glanced at them and quickly looked away, reluctant to elaborate. "A lot can change in two years," he ventured. "I pursued someone else. Gained some perspective."

Mike and Splinter shared a worried glance, all too aware of his careful wording. "And you can't tell us who," the younger turtle deduced. "Or you would have already."

Donatello's tone became sharper. "Stop speculating. Maybe she's just a very private person. The point is, I learned that when you have more in common with someone than just a desire to have sex, it's just…" He lost his annoyance and grimaced at his knee pads, concluding lamely, "Well – it's better."

Splinter tilted his head at Don. "Realizing *that* … does not take a genius, my genius."

"I know! I know," Donatello groaned, shaking his head, his face hot with embarrassment. "I was starry-eyed and stupid."

"You were vajazzled!" Mike decided, giving his brother a sympathetic shoulder pat. His lip curled as he thought about it some more. "See… vajazzled, I totally get. What blows my mind is that she burns you, and two years go by, and you got new perspectives and stuff, so you just - jump right back into bed with her?" He gave his brother an incredulous look, one that demanded explanation.

"Well," Donatello slowed down, suddenly timid and choosing his words with great care. "I was in a pretty bad place. Leo was gone by then. And I'd just… made a horrible mistake. I thought my life was over. But she swooped out of nowhere and saved me. Of course I was grateful, more than enough to forgive her."

"What happ-?" Mike began, but Master Splinter cut him off with a slash of his hand.

" *Yame yo!* Donatello cannot say any more about it. Not if it was Renet who helped him."

"Oh." Mike averted his gaze, thoughts awhirl. "Timey wimey stuff. Right."

Don seemed to relax slightly. "Thank you for understanding, Master Splinter."

"Mmh," Splinter scowled, looking down in thought. "It is not quite understanding. It seems to me that these are very dangerous waters in which you are treading." His black eyes lifted, settling firmly on Donatello. "But you know that."

The turtle's eyes dropped back to his lap. " *Hai* .'

"You *had* to accept the help of the Time Mistress? There was no alternative left?"

His voice was bleak. "None whatsoever."

Mike's eyes landed on the 'Stages of Human Intimacy' chart. There was still a heavy black scribble where it used to say 'Intercourse'. He looked back at Don and asked, "So all that time, you guys never... well." He'd been about to say, 'had sex all the way', but corrected himself in time. After all, Don had said he considered Jhanna his first, even though they hadn't done *that.* Many years of sitcom innuendo had led him to believe in the baseball chart of sexuality – and intercourse was "home base", the ultimate win. Mike realized he was going to have to train himself to stop thinking that way if he was going to keep the promise he had made to Don. "You never put it in her?" he amended.

"Oh – I did, actually. Um. Renet isn't human."

"She looks pretty human," Mike pointed out, openly skeptical.

"Trust me, she's not. She was born many light-years from Earth, on Homeworld 2. It's part of the Federation of D'Hoonib."

"Those same dudes who were fighting in a war with the Triceratons? Don't we hate those guys?"

Donatello shrugged weakly. "I don't. The logic was flawed on either side of that conflict, if you ask me. Anyway, it doesn't come up much. Renet's not very political."

"Okay. So, what makes her so much safer than a human?"

Don scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully. "Well, mostly their advanced medical industry and non-puritanical attitudes about sex, including inter-species sex. Renet takes it all for granted of course, but their every-day applications for biotechnology are really something else." His eyes lit up the way they always did at an opportunity to enlighten them about alien technology. "They use nano-tech in utero to eliminate disease and infection. It can prevent pregnancy – or increase her chances, if that's what she wants. And

in regards to us, it can help maintain structural integrity." He paused, belatedly recognizing that he had used a bunch of nerd words in his explanation, and glanced over at Mike uncertainly. "Sorry, am I losing you?"

Mike frowned, pretty sure he had been following along well enough. *But just in case…* "I think you just said that you can get it on with Renet because she has a bunch of tiny computer bugs in her hoo-hah."

Splinter must not have been following the technobabble very well at all because his eyes suddenly widened at Michelangelo's crude translation.

The older turtle's grin was incredulous. "Please don't call them 'bugs'. Man, she would NOT like that description." He shook his head and made a face. "I'm not sure I do either! They're actually more like - I don't know - synthetic bacteria which are pre-programmed to act in certain beneficial ways?"

"Bacteria!" Mike had to laugh. "Oh yeah. That's WAY sexier."

"Okay, so maybe the science going on behind the scenes isn't sexy," Donatello admitted. "But in practice, I'm telling you: it's a pretty good time. You can't feel it at all unless there's a problem. It activates under duress, kind of like a force field. Approach a certain pain threshold, it toughens up and sort of – evicts you. Which is great, because she doesn't sustain damage, and by that point, I am feeling so good that I hardly notice that it happened."

"Whoa," Mike needed a moment to fully absorb all of that. "Space condoms!" he finally declared.

"Sure, if you like," Donatello sighed. He was less appreciative than anyone of Michelangelo's penchant for applying silly names to everything. "Plus they're fully adjustable, based on – ah, well, how much duress she can comfortably endure."

"For Michelangelo's sake, we had best speak plainly. I believe you mean to say, whether or not the young lady… ahem, well… likes it rough," Splinter finally managed after some effort.

"Exactly," Don agreed shyly. "Which – it might help. If they – do." He shook his head as if determined to get them back on track. "Regardless, Federat girls are a pretty great match for us. They all come pre-equipped with this technology. Omatrans, too – I bet it was their original invention, come to think of it. But they're closely allied with the Federation, and share a lot of technology. Omatrans are an interesting race. The women are more intellectual than the men for some reason, and both genders tend to be beautiful – you know, if you're into blue skin."

Splinter pointed out, "It does not sound strange to me. But then, I raised four sons with green skin."

"So you'd go gay for Omatrans, is what you're sayin'?" Mike couldn't resist, though he knew before the words were out of his mouth that the taunt would be ineffective on Donatello.

"No, no. I'm just saying they're kind of like elves, you know? Tolkien, not Keebler. They're lithe and graceful, and they don't share any of Earth's expectations about manliness. Aside from Jhanna, I haven't had any success with them, to be honest. Mostly due to their strange gender standards." He paused suddenly to look Mike up and down. "But it occurs to me that they would probably respond *much* better to you."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Michelangelo wondered, blue eyes popping wider. He was not sure if he was being complimented or insulted.

"I mean, *I'm* serious and scholarly. Cautious. Responsible. But Omatran women view all of these as very feminine qualities. They rely on their men to be impulsive, creative, and passionate. It's a man's role to break them out of their routines, make them laugh."

"That's weird." Mike was having trouble wrapping his head around it.

"I know! Not to mention completely unfair. This Omatran I know, he's brilliant at chemistry but can't get taken seriously on his home planet due to being male. He actually has to work in the entertainment industry as a fallback source of income. It's kind of depressing that inequality still exists in alien cultures that are supposedly much more advanced than our own." He scuffed his heel against the back of the couch and noted, "Anyway, I'm pretty sure I would have to act like a totally different person to even get an Omatran girl to talk to me."

"Ack…. Donatello!" Splinter did not like the sound of that and his voice signaled his displeasure.

"What?" Don blinked up at him in surprise..

"Tell me you would not do such a thing. You would not dishonor yourself and the lady with such a deception. *Correct?* "

"I-I didn't! I wouldn't." Don insisted, but with a nervous laugh that sounded to Mike like he must have at least thought about it. He shrugged sheepishly "You've raised me better than that. Okay?"

Mike found himself agreeing with Master Splinter. "Gotta be yourself, dude. Screw those stuck up blue chicks. Wait, no. I mean, *don't* screw them – crap. You know what I mean."

"I know. And I'm trying! Did I mention how hot they are?" He sighed dreamily. "There's a whole planet full of beautiful, teal-skinned nerd girls who won't give me the time of day, and that's sad." He flashed Mike a grin. "But I'll live."

Splinter chuckled, mollified by this answer.

"I suppose we should also consider Triceratons. As a species they're quite a bit larger than we are, not to mention tough as nails. So they are likely to be compatible even without any – er, space condoms."

This broke Michelangelo's brain right in half. "But… but they're Triceratons!" he spluttered. He'd met Triceratons, and the thought had never even occurred to him.

Don widened his eyes and grinned. In that moment, maybe just half a moment, he looked like the sweet little child Splinter had raised. " *I know* , right? And it gets worse!" He leaned forward conspiratorially. "You have to *physically combat them* to prove your worthiness. For anything! For just the right to look at them in a kind-of-interested way! It's apparently a sacred rite that guides their evolution and strengthens the whole race or something. It's also the only way a Triceraton girl gets turned on - by being overpowered. Which is fascinating in theory, and *terrifying* in practice. Also, for the longest time I couldn't tell the females from the males without surreptitiously scrutinizing their groins. One of Renet's friends finally gave me a helpful tip. She said they were usually *the big ones.* "

Mike held up one hand. "Whoa, whoa. Hold up. Terrifying *in practice?* " He slapped a hand down on his brother's shell with enough enthusiasm to pitch him forward to the edge of the couch. "D! You motherfucking BALLER, did you actually *bang a Triceraton?* "

"Language, Michelangelo," Splinter reprimanded. "I have been very lax about this so far. But I would like to remind you that this is still a lesson. From this point on, I will be lax ONLY when the context is – in keeping with the topic at hand. Not when it is gratuitous. Is that clear?"

"Sorry, Master Splinter," Mike mumbled, trying to look contrite but he couldn't stop grinning at Don.

"Though... it occurs to me that I would also like to hear the answer. *Did* you make love to an alien dinosaur lady, Donatello?"

"Nope," Don admitted wryly, flushing. "I was dared by a friend to hit on one. And then I was beaten up very badly by an alien dinosaur

lady." He waited a beat before concluding with a shrug, "But she bought me a drink afterwards. Said it was an honorable effort."

"Lady Triceratons... huh," Splinter mused, half to himself. "Perhaps Raphael would have benefited from this lesson after all."

"Holy crap, dude. He's right!"

"That's genius! It never even occurred to me. But they're definitely reptilian." Both boys were impressed with this suggestion.

"Probably no hair on them."

"No tits, either," Don agreed. "Not a bit of softness, in fact. They're all horns and scales!"

"If you are going to bring this up with him, *please* approach the topic gently," Splinter sighed. He could already see the many ways it could go very, very badly. "You would be wiser to wait a few days, at least. Give him adequate time to unwind after the stress of making such a personal confession."

"Good point," Don agreed.

Mike cackled. "I'll do my best not to start teasing him the second he walks through the door. But no promises, right? I know my limits."

Splinter ignored this. "Donatello, I have another question. Is this really your best solution? Your brothers should only seek romance with members of an alien race? Aren't long-distance relationships supposed to be difficult even when both participants live on the same planet? What you are proposing sounds like a very, very long distance relationship."

"I don't think he's talking about *relationships* , Master Splinter," Mike clarified wryly. "I think this part of the lesson is all about hooking up."

"I see," Splinter said, like he had been afraid of that.

Surprise flitted across Donatello's face, quickly followed by shame. "That… honestly wasn't my intention," he admitted quietly. "But it's true enough, I suppose. Mike, I can show you how to get laid, how to do it safely. I can even give you some tips that will play to your strengths and help you show her a good time. But I am not a subject matter expert when it comes to long-term relationships."

"Well, I am going to want to hear most of that stuff, Donnie. But I'm not really trying to have a bunch of sex with strangers." Mike tried to be flippant and cool about this, but by the end he wasn't smiling. "Maybe it's stupid to come out and say it like this – because I do want to get laid, don't get me wrong! But I'm pretty sure I'm the type of guy who would rather fall crazy in love with a girl first."

"I know you are." Don tried to smile, but he looked so sad. His words were haunted and hushed. "Frankly, it scares me a little. You have *got* to be careful with humans. They're *so fragile* . It isn't worth it."

"Maybe she is worth it," the smaller turtle insisted quietly, clenching his fists in his lap and looking down at them. "You don't know how much she's worth to me."

"Mikey..." Don sighed.

"But go on, give me a hard time about her, like you always do." Mike's hackles were up now, defensive and starting to scowl. "Would it make any difference if I told you that she's really smart? She built her own computer out of junk parts. Did you know that? Whatever," he ranted, "I know you still hate her, and I guess it hardly matters because we'll never be together anyway. I'm a jerk for even wishing it."

"I don't hate Angel," the other turtle tried to interject. "I was only trying to discourage you..."

"Love is not easily discouraged," their *sensei* pointed out quietly.

"Well, let me just put this right on the table, Don. No lawyer wording at all. I promise not to do anything that could hurt somebody. But you can't ask me to promise not to fall in love with a human."

"Because you already have," Don concluded with heavy finality.

"I - tried not to," Michelangelo deflated, his brief anger already dispersing. "I know it's stupid and wrong. I know she loves Flip, and he loves her. But if she came to me tomorrow..." His chin came up and he set his shoulders back with fresh determination. "If she said she wanted me instead, then I would be with her. I would find a way. And none of you could stop me."

"I would not try," Splinter assured him gently. "I consider her an ally of the Hamato clan already. She is a sweet girl, in spite of the many bad situations she has endured, and she has always been respectful to me."

"Wow," Donatello rubbed his face with his hands. "I see now why you wanted me to teach this class, *sensei* . You don't have the experience to prepare him. The risks, the – the *willpower* involved…"

"Then help him," their father commanded, indicating Mike and himself with a wave of his hand. "Make us both understand."

"I'll try. Look, Mikey. The truth is, my issues with Angel are two-fold. First, it's so obvious that you've been friend-zoned by that girl, and you don't even see it."

"I do *not* like that term, Donatello," the rat warned. He had heard it before on television, usually in the context of a joke. Master Splinter felt the very concept was appalling.

"Oh. Sorry, Master Splinter." Don winced and made a hasty attempt to explain himself. "Of course it's fine if a girl chooses to be friends with a guy. That's not what I really mean. But sometimes it seems like she uses Mike for the attention and emotional support that she

isn't getting from her bad boy drug dealer boyfriend. I think it just riles up the protective big brother in me."

Splinter looked at Mike like he was expected to have some rebuttal ready. He scowled faintly and mumbled an obligatory, "Don't talk sh—crap about Flip, man. You don't know him. He provides for her, probably better than I ever could. Treats her like a queen." It was a halfhearted defense. Until very recently, it would have been a vehement one. The truth was that Flip had taken off on a business-related trip to Chicago over two weeks ago and still hadn't returned. He hadn't called, hadn't picked up his phone for anyone. Gelica was going mad with worry.

"Noted," Donatello inclined his head slightly. "If you want full disclosure, I was initially worried Angel and her friends would be a bad influence on you. But so far I've seen no evidence of that, and if any turns up – well, that's Leo and Splinter's problem now." This last was spoken coldly, but his kindness returned as he refocused on Mike. "Mostly I don't want to see you get hurt, that's all. I know how hard it is to care for someone who is with somebody else."

"It sucks," Mike sighed.

"It sure does."

They were both silent for a beat or two, considering their similar predicaments.

Finally Mike wondered, "So what's the second reason?"

The faint smile of sympathy Don had been wearing wiped cleanly away. "The second reason. It's… well, it's physical." His gaze fell into his lap.

"Go on," Mike encouraged, though he wasn't liking the sound of this. Donatello always made a lot of eye-contact when he was engaged and glad to be talking to you about something. This was doubly true when he was talking about something he considered to be important

for the other person to know. That was how it should be. That's how it always was before, when the cogs of their team were turning properly and everything was right with the world. Michelangelo had learned by now to be extra wary any time Donatello insisted on telling him something but couldn't look him in the eye.

Don wet his lips and began in a slow, cautious tone. "Maybe you've noticed, but Renet is… toned. She's well-nourished, and she's tall enough to be a supermodel. Angel is quite the opposite. The girl is a waif."

Mike nodded patiently. Donatello sometimes took a while to get to the point.

"All you have to do is look at her tiny wrists and ankles and it's apparent, how small she's built. That… could be a real problem."

"I got it, D! You already said it doesn't fit. And we have the –the frenzy thing, you don't have to—"

Donatello interrupted him, attempting to get it all out in one big clinical rush. "I never said it doesn't fit! It mostly fits, okay? But not a tiny girl like that. I would be concerned about pushing past her cervix, damaging her uterine walls."

"Wait," Mike croaked, already horrified. "What would that do?"

Don watched his hands become fists. "Just fucking *google it* . And if you bloom in her, inside *any* girl, it will not just hurt her - it will serve its biological function. She will resist and find she is unable to dislodge from you." He was turning purple by the end of this, but plowed on relentlessly. "And she won't be tough inside, like a female turtle. She could really be damaged trying to get free."

Mike's brow pinched with worry. He squeezed his brother's arm urgently. "It's okay, Don. Breathe!"

It was wise advice, and Donatello did not ignore it. He was quiet for several long, slow breaths: in, out, in, out. He knew how not to hyperventilate.

Then he said, in a strange voice that made Mike's heart spike and pound with fresh adrenaline, "But there's more."

"Damn it. No! How can there be more? That's already so bad!"

"I know. I'm *sorry.* But turtles are not gentle lovers. Did you know, in the wild, males often corral a potential mate by slamming into her shell? Right in the face sometimes. He might try to bite or scratch her neck if she tries to resist – when she tries. Because, for turtles, that's the norm. She's expected to 'play hard to get'." He was trying to do the Doctor Professor thing, reciting all this with hurried detachment. But there was a note of desperation in his voice that seemed to clamor louder with every word. Emotional devastation was rapidly catching up to him. "I'm not saying we'll lose control and behave in these ways specifically. But these are the instincts that will be hammering around in the reptile part of our brain. You could – you could slam her head onto tiles and not realize it. You could wake up to a bloodbath. Especially the closer you are to –t-to being in heat, there are more likely to be – correlations, um." He swallowed miserably. Don's voice became too high, a creak of pain. "I wish – I just, I wish I didn't – like it. When they- when they struggle, that's the part—"

He brought his hands up to his face and began to cry. "Makes me – hate myself," he gasped. "Wh-what kind of *monster—?* "

They both reached for him, but Mike was faster. He held onto Don for dear life, crushing him fiercely. A moment later, Splinter's thin arms and trailing, silk sleeves encircled them both. "Shh… No, my son. *Not that word.* That is *never* a word for you."

Mike couldn't get out anything more coherent than, "Oh my God, dude. Oh my God…"

Donatello lifted his face off Mike and looked at him, despairing. All the love and empathy in the world was waiting there on his little brother's face. He could see his own haunted eyes reflected in those compassionate blue ones.

Don wanted to speak. He knew it would be good for him, like purging a poison, but he couldn't say more. Not a single word more. It was shocking that he was getting away with what had already been said.

I need your help. I can't get free of this. The words he would say sat heavy on his tongue.

Don put his head back down on Michelangelo's shoulder and cried harder.

Meanwhile, half-way across the galaxy, Jonas had lost his cool. He was crouched over the third sphere, having a one-sided shouting match with it. "Don't you do it, Hamato! Don't you fucking open your mouth, mate. Keep it together!"

Titan's shadow stood silently beside him, watching the scene play out.

Jonas looked up at him urgently through falls of blue-black hair, which looked crazier than usual. He'd raked his fingers through it too often during the mounting suspense. "You're telling me this isn't an amber alert? Because, um, pretty sure I should have hit the alarm by now. I *would* have, if you weren't in charge and – uh, you know, standing right here."

"Not yet." Lord Titan's robotic arm lifted and gestured for silence. Jonas was startled to notice that tears had made tracks down his face, for all that his voice and face could have been carved from stone. "Not yet. He needs this."

They gazed into sphere in silence and watched the poor kid sob for almost two and a half minutes.

Then Lord Titan drew a breath that seemed to gather unseen power. Already some faded-out, world-weary quality about him had flickered out of existence. Concerns and stress lines were vanishing right before the young Omatran's pinned indigo eyes. The Time Lord's foreshadow smiled at him with a face that was not quite young, but distinctly younger than it had been. "Go time."

Titan touched his belt buckle and spoke aloud, addressing what must be an open comm to the council, or possibly a spell. Jonas always preferred the explanation of technology, but with Time Lords one could never be completely sure. "Please raise threat level to amber on my authorization. I would also like it put on record that this is *not* due to any new transgression from Donatello. We've got invasive action incoming from our well-meaning pain-in-the-ass big brother. I'm moving now to intercept."

"Understood, My Lord," a clipped female voice replied. "Threat level has been updated on the big board. Please keep us posted."

"Do you require assistance?" rasped a flat, metallic whisper that never failed to make his skin crawl, even when Jonas was braced to hear from them. The Unweavers always checked in when the threat level increased on a priority case.

They were supposed to be unnerving. Renet was terrified of them. But the new boss gave them a reply that was cheeky and very nearly cheerful. "None whatsoever, thanks for asking! I got this. Titan out!"

He disappeared without another word. There was no familiar pop of displaced air, no stutter of reality, no flash of light. He simply vanished.

Jonas peered around his empty room for a moment. Then he cracked a smile and shook his head in admiration.

"Something's wrong with Don."

Raph didn't realize that Leo had stopped and nearly bowled right into him.

"Yeah, no kidding," he agreed, regaining his footing easily and backing up a step. "We both heard him…"

"No, I mean, *right now* . Something is wrong, back at the lair."

"How… oh." Raph's frown deepened, torn between conflicting motivations. On the one hand, he was starting to feel worried sick about Don. But on the other, he hated spooky ninja mind magic with a fiery passion. "Should we – do y'wanna head back now?" he stammered. "I mean, if ya think we could actually…"

"I could check on him from here," Leonardo announced with a strange light in his eye. "I still… I've got a fix on him somehow."

Somehow? Raphael didn't like the sound of that at all. He figured the only thing worse than spooky ninja magic was *amateur* spooky ninja magic. "I don't know, Leo," he hastened, his upper lip curling with uncertainty. "I don't think you're supposed to do that shit without a *sensei* guiding you."

Leonardo scoffed. "Master Splinter doesn't know *how* to do this. And the Ancient One is much too far away." His gaze was still unfocused in a way that Raph found very unnerving.

"Now slow down a second, Leo." he tried again, putting up his hands. "I don't know the first thing about this stuff…"

"You don't need to. I understand enough for both of us." Leonardo's feverish golden-brown eyes locked on his. He abruptly seized Raphael's uplifted hands and decided, "Come on. We'll check it out together."

He leapt up, straight up, tugging free of his body and dragging his brother's familiar, rough-and-tumble soul along with him. Raphael threw all of his weight against these efforts and almost managed to

hang on. The sheer force of Leonardo's greater skill and headstrong determination overpowered him. Raph snapped free of his mortal form with a terrible disorienting wrench. Then they were plummeting, hurtling, rocketing through sewer tunnels and reservoirs and the black abyss of concrete slabs and bedrock. *Taking the most direct route possible,* some whirling yet miraculously conscious part of Raphael's brain dimly reported. He felt like he would be sick any moment, though by now his actual stomach was miles behind them.

They were honing in on some beacon of terrible sorrow. *Can that really be Don?*

They were coming in so fast. Raph braced for an ugly impact of some kind and was not disappointed.

It was like hitting a solid brick wall, but there was nothing there – nothing anywhere, suddenly, except utter blackness. At first Raph could only lie there, shivering and stunned. He tried to get up with only partial success, making it to his hands and knees. There was a moment of pure terror when looked down and couldn't see his own hands. He squeezed his eyes shut tight, then opened them and looked again. Now he could *almost* see them. There, the faintest translucent outline of himself. It was only slightly reassuring.

He looked up, past his freaky ghost hands, and realized that Donatello had materialized. Their brother was standing over them - and wow, did he looked *pissed.*

"Don!" he heard Leo call out from somewhere close by, though sound was oddly distorted in this place. He turned toward the sound and saw his oldest brother beside him. Leonardo's form was far more substantial than Raph's, though not completely solid. Already he had recovered enough to pick himself up off the floor – or, the vast black nothingness where a floor should have been – and moved into a defensive crouch. "Are you safe? We felt…"

"GET OUT OF MY HEAD! GET THE FUCK OUUUUUUUUUUUT!" Donatello roared, growing larger with rage. His familiar voice shifted

several octaves until it was demonic and downright terrifying. He drew his weapon and charged Leonardo, swinging with what looked like supernatural strength. The bo staff struck like a thunder clap, and the image of Fearless shattered into a million sparks that blazed and winked out of existence.

He could no longer sense his older brother at all. Leo was not just gone; he had been fucking *vanquished.*

"Oh shit," Raph swore under his breath. It seemed only natural that he would be next.

The vengeful Don-shaped demon glanced around as if startled by an unexpected sound. He quickly honed in on the barely visible turtle who was still cowering and too sick to stand. *"Raph…?"*

Correction. He was *almost* too sick to stand. Raphael drew upon some inner core of strength and stubbornness and managed to stagger drunkenly upright. He swayed with vertigo but somehow found his center and kept both spooky ghost feet beneath him. "Don. I swear…" He held up his palms in surrender. "I didn't mean to. Didn't want this. *I'm sorry* , Don. M'sorry for so many fucking things…"

For just a moment, Donatello seemed to be listening. Then his eyes narrowed and became pools of hellfire. "Why don't you say that to my face, you fucking coward!" Don closed the distance between them with a graceful spin. The bo staff connected with the side of Raphael's head in a deafening, brain-rattling crack.

The world went white.

Then hazy red.

Then it was nasty chunks on the concrete in front of him. His mouth was full of stomach acid and vomit. Leo was there to support him, making sure he didn't get sick on the tails of his bandana, babbling apologies. For a time Raphael could not even make out what his

brother was saying. It just sounded like so much frantic noise. "—my fault. Oh my God, Raph. Oh my God, I thought I'd lost you. I didn't know how to bring you back. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Don'tchu… evvr' fuckin'… *hrk!* " He choked and spat and reeled. He scrubbed at his mouth with battered knuckles. His head, right where Don had struck him, was fucking *killing* him. "Never! Never again, Leo!"

"Never again," Leonardo agreed, pale and shaking. "Never again. I promise."

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thanks again to Princessebee for the beta read.

Break

Another alone on an everyday night

Think in the morning

Looking for alright

Warming the blood flow

With poison, I don't know why

Maybe the rain will stop following me

Dripping the colors

Running the daylight

Over the cloud burst

Hoping it don't burst

Right before my eyes - erased

Our lives - erased

- "Nowhere Again", the Secret Machines

Chapter 22: Break

Donatello was maneuvering into reverse almost as soon as the crying spell was over. "Can I p-please, I just need…" he mumbled, trying to pull away from them.

It had become a familiar litany and Master Splinter took the hint right away. He gave his boys one last squeeze before releasing them and

sat back on his haunches. His heart was brimming with a terrible ache, but he wanted to give Donatello whatever he said he needed. Even if it was distance...

"No." Michelangelo was not going to stand for it. He seized both of Donatello's forearms with a relentless grip.

Don twisted his features, twisted his face. His whole body tried to wrench aside but he was too wrecked from the recent break-down to shake off his brother's hold. Mike remained steadfast, blocking his retreat.

"You are not running away from me," the younger turtle insisted gravely. "Not this time."

"Mikey…" Don whispered, pleading.

Mike kept his eyes fixed on Don but tilted his chin aside to address their father. "We need to take a *break* , Master Splinter *.* "

"Yes," the rat agreed quietly. His black eyes flicked to his youngest son uncertainly. "Agreed. But Michelangelo, we mustn't press him—"

Mike cut him off. "There's stuff he can't talk to us about. And it's killing him. Got it."

Splinter blinked, looking back and forth between them. This was a rare voice from his youngest son, only spoken in times of war, pushed well past his usual jocular bantering. This was the voice he would use to announce that they were losing a battle, or that one of their own was badly hurt. *Both may be true, even now.* The rodent's thoughts were awhirl. *Yoshi sensei,* he silently prayed. *Watashi no musuko wo yoroshiku onegai shimasu . Please take care of my son.*

"Donnie."

Donatello had resigned himself to being captured. He wasn't fighting anymore, but twisted as far away from them as his brother's iron grip

would allow. His face was turned sharply aside. To Splinter, he seemed simultaneously feral and submissive in the way he exposed his throat.

"Donnie." Mike clenched his jaw and spoke through his teeth, " *Donnie.* Look at me, man. I am *begging* you to look at me."

Something in his voice must have done the trick. Donatello's slow recoil released all at once, like a spring under too much tension. Their teary eyes met.

"There you are," Mike murmured hoarsely, ticking a half-a-second smile. He tilted his head slightly, maintaining eye contact like it was a life line cast between them. He confessed very softly, "I am scared for you, bro. Are *you* scared for you?"

"Oh yes," Don breathed the answer with a frightening lack of hesitation.

"Alright. Okay." Mike touched his forehead to Don's and shut his eyes. Donatello closed his too and they shared a silent moment.

Michelangelo drew back and looked at Don intently. "Kitchen."

Donatello didn't reply aloud but looked back at him with confusion.

The blue-eyed turtle tried again. "Dude. *Kitchen.* "

It had been awhile – a *very* long while – since they had used these code words, but finally Donatello's eyes lit with recognition. "But – Raph and Leo aren't even—," he stammered. "Wh-what are we hiding from, exactly?"

"All this, man," Mike's gaze flicked around to indicate their surroundings, then settled back on his brother. "All of it."

"It's not even a –a separate room, since we moved to this lair," Don noted. He was not really intending to argue the point, but his mouth

did its own thing sometimes. "W-we have an open floor plan, so technically…"

"None of it matters, Donnie. *Kitchen!* "

Don sniffled and agreed, "Kitchen." They rose to leave.

Splinter splayed a hand on the older turtle's plastron to intercept him as they moved past. "Donatello. I meant the words I spoke to you before." He dipped his nose slightly and insisted, "I will always forgive you, and I will always love you."

Donatello's heart squeezed painfully in his chest. Maybe he needed to hear these words more than he was ready to admit. He dropped his eyes and whispered, "Love you, too."

Splinter nodded once, releasing the boy. He did not address his youngest, but caught his eye and patted his arm gently to convey profound approval. Then his nose twitched and he inquired, "Do I smell – garbanzo beans?" He snatched the bag of exploded hummus from the waste bin, peeked inside, and clicked his tongue against his long front teeth. "Tch… thrown away, untouched and perfectly fresh? How wasteful we have become since our scavenging days. Michelangelo, please salvage this and feed it to your brother."

"Good call, *sensei* ." Michelangelo caught the tossed bag easily with one hand while the other held onto Don's shoulder, steering him towards the kitchen alcove.

"I will be in meditation. But please come rouse me if there is any need whatsoever."

"You got it." Mike tucked the carry-out bag under one arm, heedless of the grease, and snagged a wadded lump of foil that had been forgotten on a side table during the earlier chaos. "Check it out, Donnie! I got like half a meatball sub left with your name on it."

"My name is not on that," Donatello observed without inflection.

"Yeah? We'll fix that. Gimme a sharpie and, like, two seconds!"

The other turtle made a face. "Mikey. I'm not even…"

"You're not hungry, dude." Michelangelo halted to give his brother a patient look. "No kidding. You haven't been hungry for a goddamn year. But it's okay. *I get it.* "

Don recognized the determination written on his brother's face and gave up arguing the point any further. He sighed and resumed a forward march while his brother trailed one pace behind him.

"I mean it, dude. I'm on to you. I didn't take you serious enough last week with that contract thing, but you got my attention now. I'm gonna be on your ass like brown on rice."

"You mean white on rice?" Don suggested, glancing back over his shoulder as he slid onto the nearest battered chair.

"Naw, man. Have you even looked in the pantry since Leo's been back?" As he grumbled, Mike took a plate and a small bowl from the cupboard, then a knife from the drawer. He sat down across from Don and went to work scraping hummus off the pita slices and the inside of the bag. "It's all *fucking brown* , Don. Bunch'a long grain, whole wheat, nasty-ass organic *fucking brown* rice, usually all mixed up with some lentils and quinoa and pine nuts and some other crunchy fucking shit."

Donatello's mouth twitched, almost smiling. "At least you're not taking it personally."

"Oh, I'm taking it personally. You don't even know how personal I'm taking it." The pita slices were slowly emerging from the mess. Mike was paying close attention to this task, scraping each pale triangle carefully and evenly. "Every time I open the pantry, dude, I wanna punch Leo right in his stupid face."

"Violence cannot solve complex carbohydrates," Donatello intoned solemnly in his Master Splinter voice, which Mike thought was low-key and not really owning the role, but still pretty good.

"Maybe not, but you know what can? Fucking carry-out." Michelangelo slid a gorgeous looking platter of hummus towards his brother. He was pretty sure that Iron Chefs would have to give him five points for plating.

"That looks…almost appetizing," Donatello admitted. His gray-brown eyes had flooded again but this time he didn't run or try to hide it. He smiled and knuckled at his running snout. "Thank you."

"Hey, you're welcome." Mike folded his arms on the table in front of him and leaned in closer. "Listen, it don't really matter what you can or can't tell me. I am on Team Don no matter what, okay? I don't need to know the timey-wimey details to help you get through this."

Don didn't trust himself to do more than squint his eyes and nod.

"I was even thinking - maybe you could let me play the part of *your* big brother for a bit."

"Sounds good to me," Donnie agreed, which was not at all the answer Mike had been expecting. His features pinched with a fresh wash of pain that Mike didn't quite understand. Not until he bowed his head and confessed in a much smaller voice, "I don't actually have one of those anymore."

Mike straightened up with surprise. "What? No way. Don't say that. I know things were getting ugly between you two back there, and then he sort of went crazy and attacked you. But that was, like, *temporary* insanity, I'm pretty sure. Soon he's gonna realize he was way out of line. Bet you anything he knows it already!"

"N-no, you don't understand," Don's brow furrowed in dismay and he shook his head. "I'm not *disowning* Leo. We had a scuffle today, but I love Leo with all my heart."

"Good! Then – what the hell are you talking about?" Mike was completely lost.

"I mean *literally* , Mikey," Donatello explained with what sounded like well-contained panic. "I've spent so much time in Nulltime and hiding out in pocket dimensions, I'm probably closer to – *God, I don't even know.* " His eyes widened and then flicked back and forth as he did the math. "Twenty-two? No… Twenty-one, at least."

Just when Mike thought his mind couldn't be blown any further. His voice went up half an octave involuntarily. "Are you…are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious!" Don hissed, keeping his voice down. "Why would I play around about something like that?"

"What the heck – why would you… we are all supposed to turn nineteen next month!"

Don had nothing to say to that, no response but a helpless shrug. Michelangelo decided he needed a moment to collect his thoughts and put them in coherent order. He came up with a better question to ask. "What were you doing, spending so much time in other dimensions?"

Donatello had scooped a bunch of hummus onto a pita slice and stuck the whole thing in his mouth. An obvious stalling tactic, but it was so hard to get him to eat anything lately that Mike wasn't about to call him out on it. He waited while Don chewed and finally swallowed. "I… had a job. Made some friends. Hooked up with some women. Finally found out what it's like to attend a class with people who aren't your brothers. And I was helping Renet with – with a bunch of things that I obviously can't tell you about."

Mike's eyes were drawn away from Don to look at the microwave on the opposite wall. The digital readout was flashing. It was just one word, over and over: **WRONG. WRONG. WRONG.**

His gaze skittered across the room. There weren't any other digital read-outs in the immediate vicinity. The kitchen appliances were all pretty old. He wasn't as freaked out anymore. There was still a chance he was going crazy, but since learning more of Don's situation it seemed a lot more likely that Time Lords were messing with him. "Got it," he said aloud, not sure if he was responding to Don or the microwave whisperer.

ONLY YOU. The glowing green letters disappeared, then reverted to displaying the current time.

Donatello took his words as a cue to continue. "Mostly I was… healing. Coping, I guess. Trying to figure out how to live with myself. For a while I could only handle real life in small, well-rehearsed doses." His cheeks were dark with embarrassment. He had picked up another pita slice and was merely toying with it, tearing small bits off and rolling the dough between his fingertips. All at once he seemed to realize what he was doing and tossed it back onto the plate. He looked up at Mike and suddenly pleaded, much quieter, "Please don't tell Leo."

"Yeeeaah…better not," Mike agreed with a wince. When he thought back on Donatello's behavior over the past year, a lot of strange, stilted conversations and unexpectedly emotional reactions suddenly made a lot more sense. He was very nearly able to pinpoint the exact time period when – he was starting to think of it as The Bloodbath – must have occurred. Mike considered the table top for a few moments before blurting out a question, the only one bouncing around in his brain that was one-hundred percent safe to ask: "You celebrated a bunch of extra birthdays *without us?* "

Don broke into a weary half-smile, like Mike's complaint struck him as cute. "No, Mikey. I didn't celebrate any of them. There's not really such thing as a day there. But if you did split the time into Third Verse equivalent hours…"

"Dude, who cares about any of that? You can't get older without a birthday cake and presents. Those are, like, the basic minimum

requirements."

Don looked mystified by his awesome logic. "If you say so."

"I do say so! You should know that, until very recently, I was a birthday *professional* . I attended over fifty birthdays last year alone, so by now I am pretty much an expert on how they're supposed to work."

A smile pulled at the edges of Don's mouth. "I guess that's fair."

"Anyway, you think who's the oldest in this family has ever been all chronological, like - the order we were hatched in? No fucking way. I betcha I hatched before ALL you guys, cuz I'm the fastest and super athletic! Plus, I'm *way* too A.D.D. to handle being stuck in a tiny egg with nothing but white walls to look at."

"Well, it would probably be dark inside the egg. And the shell would be soft and leathery and nothing like a wall," Don pointed out. He popped another loaded pita slice and added, speaking with his mouth full, "Otherwise, all valid points."

"I know, right? S'like, we were probably all from the same clutch, but we got no way of knowing who hatched first. Who's the big brother in this family has always been about maturity, who's responsible, and being dependable, y'know?"

"I completely agree," Don nodded. Of course all these facts had occurred to him long ago.

"Well, I just want you to know that I will be all those things, if that's what you need from me." There was no joke in this delivery. Mike prayed that Donatello would understand how majorly serious he was being right now.

Don was speechless, studying him for several moments. "Please don't mature on my account," he said softly. "At least, not all the way. I don't think you realize how much I've missed our banter."

Now it was Mike's turn for his brow to crease and his eyes to flood. It was probably the best thing Don could have said to him. He sniffled and slid one arm towards his brother, elbow pad still resting on the table, his cupped hand extended. Donatello took the cue immediately. He pushed the hummus aside and leaned in, dragging his own arm forward to clasp Mike's hand.

Mike gripped it hard and looked him in the eyes. "Listen to me. You don't gotta worry about that anymore. You and me, we're doing just fine. We are *solid* ."

"Okay," Don whispered with a faint but urgent nod. He squeezed Mike's hand in return, then released it and leaned back with his shell against the chair. He hugged his arms around his plastron and gave Mike a strange smile, both apologetic and grateful. "Fair warning though, if you really want to be my big brother." His gaze flicked away to land on the ugly peel-and-stick linoleum and he grunted once, a joyless laugh. "You've got your work cut out for you."

"Dude, I'm not sayin' I'm gonna suddenly have a katana up my ass," Mike assured him with a lopsided grin. "Sleep around if that's what you wanna do. Slam all the aliens and holograms and space hookers that you meet. I don't give a fuck. I mean, I'm not in charge of the team, either. So, there's that. But who cares? Do what makes you happy, D. Leo will get over it." He picked up the meatball sub wrapped in foil and rose from his seat, announcing, "Hey, I'm gonna heat this up for you. It's way better when the cheese is melty."

"Can't wait," Don conceded with a grimace that belied his true enthusiasm.

Jonas didn't notice him immediately. He didn't appear to be watching the spheres, either. Instead he was leaning over a glass pipe with a shard of crystal suspended in a central chamber. He was using a small eye dropper to apply several drops of an unknown liquid to the crystal. It seemed to boil immediately upon contact, producing a thick, pink vapor.

The turtle decided to wait until he had inhaled the mystery vapor into his lungs before making his presence known. "Hey, Jonas."

Naturally the alien choked on the hit and started coughing. After growing up with ninja brothers, sneaking up on this guy was a breeze.

"Hamato!" the Omatran wheezed, spinning the chair to fully face him. "What the hell. Did you *transmat* here? You realize you don't have auth to stop your timeline anymore, right? Your shit is *still active* down there. We gotta get you back before your brother finishes making that sandwich!"

So he has *been listening.* "Don't worry about that. He thinks I'm in the restroom, so we've got some time." He jerked his chin towards the pipe. "What have you got there?"

Jonas gave his friend an odd look. "No, you can't borrow it, if that's what you're thinking. You said you were going to kick everything when Leo came back. What happened to that? Anyway, you still haven't returned the one I loaned you like, four months ago." He waved a dismissive hand, "But if you've been smoking your nasty bathtub stims in there then you can fucking keep it, because I don't want to deal with the residue."

Donatello had nothing to say to that. His eyes had grown very wide.

The Omatran had started to reach again for the eye-dropper but stopped short and looked back at his guest. " *Why* are you looking at me like that?"

In response the turtle slowly lifted one hand and snapped his second finger and thumb together.

The sound of the snap was decidedly off, metallic rather than flesh and bone. And suddenly Jonas was gazing into blue eyes instead of brown ones. Titan's shadow stood before him.

"Fuck me," Jonas groaned, quickly setting the pipe down on the desk and raking his hands through his hair. He pulled on it for a second, then forced himself to straighten up and face the Time Lord with more decorum. "Hi boss," he smiled uncomfortably. "Nice disguise you got there, by the way. Real convincing."

"Kind of had to be, if I wanted to fool Leo and Raph." Titan stepped in closer so that he could properly loom over the duster. "Let's back up a second."

"Yeah? Which part?" the apprentice asked, looking suitably nervous.

"How about the part where you have apparently been sharing your recreational chemistry with my depressed and traumatized brother?" The foreshadow's thickly muscled arm folded with the cybernetic one across his armored chest.

"Just like that, huh?" Jonas sighed. "Great. This has definitely been the shortest apprenticeship in my… well, admittedly dodgy career so far."

"Did I fire you?" Titan spoke sharply. He was rapidly losing patience.

"Not yet," the Omatran allowed, peering up at him warily. "I mean, the answer to your question – if that was a question – is yes. He's become one of my favorite people to get fucked up with." He dropped his eyes and spoke with a disarming bitterness that was turned fully inward. "And while I was acting mostly under orders, I don't let myself off the hook with that excuse. Don't expect you will, either."

"Under orders," the shadow repeated flatly. For all that there was no questioning lift to those words, he expected an explanation.

"Yeah. Renet comes to me like, 'what'd you give him last night?' And I thought she was mad at first! I'm like, it was an emergency, but we're fine. There was a huge exam we weren't prepared for, and we had to stay up all night cramming and figuring shit out. And she was

all, 'well, you can give him as much of that as he wants. Because he aced that fucking test, and then he came home all happy, and he actually wanted to *talk* , and then he wanted to rock my world, and then he want to talk some more, and wow! She's not used to that lately, not from him. So she says, 'hook it up!' When I try and explain to her why this is not a good idea, she flips the bitch switch on me, like, 'I don't pay you to think. Your job right now is to look pretty and do what I fucking tell you.' Which – um, sounds pretty bad, I guess. But I should clarify, that's kind of our thing. Sometimes we mouth off to each other, and it's hot. And other times, you just want to choke her. Anyway, she tells me we'll just detox him if it gets out of hand. You've got some experience with that, don't you sweetie?" He mocked her in a sing-song falsetto, then growled. "Fucking bitch. But in the end… it was a chemistry job. And nobody gives me enough of those. So, I did my job. Shouldn't have. I know it's a messed up way to control somebody. At the time, I guess I didn't know him well enough to care. But his grades went up – *way* up. And for a while after that, he stopped talking about leaving. She called it a win."

A long, awful silence followed the conclusion of that story. Jonas could feel himself being weighed and measured, picked apart.

"I am still looking for reasons *not* to fire you," the ancient terrapin clarified eventually, like he was resuming a polite conversation. "Only coming up with one so far, but it's a good one: you haven't actually lied to me yet."

Jonas scratched at one of the newer glyphs tattooed on his skinny wrist and glanced up uncertainly.

There was a dangerous note in the Time Lord's voice now, like some deadly undercurrent lurking just below his deceptively calm surface. "Let's consider this a very strict probationary period, and this will be my number one rule: when I ask you a question, you will tell me the answer." He was speaking very slowly now, with heavy emphasis on each word. "You will tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but. Can you do that for me, Jonas?"

"Yeah," Jonas breathed, too intimidated to answer any other way.

"We'll see," Titan growled, turning sharply enough to make his cape snap behind him and starting to pace. "Because in my experience, addicts lie. They all lie. And Donatello, in *my* timeline? No exception!" He stabbed a finger at the third sphere as he said this, then whirled away from it looking like he wanted to punch something with his metal fist. " *God damn it!* I thought we would be able to stop all this before it started. So many years, and I had no idea. He was our *doctor* . It was so easy to think, 'he's so smart. He knows better. He would never…"

Jonas widened his eyes at these implications, unsure of what to say. If Renet had learned any of this, she had not seen fit to share it with him. *But her foreshadow knew,* he realized suddenly. She had been acting angry and disappointed with both Jonas and her younger self for some time now. "I'm sorry," he whispered, thinking about her ancient eyes like glittering chips of ice drilling into him.

"I believe you." Titan halted mid-step to cant an unreadable look at him. In a matter of seconds he had regained his composure. "Here's something you should probably know in advance. I am a master-level Empath, probably the best you will meet in your lifetime. I have enough control to respect the privacy of your thoughts, but I will always know how you feel. And I will always know when you lie."

"Understood, boss," Jonas agreed, sitting up straighter in his chair and managing not to cower. He had the distinct impression that it might also be within this one's power to kill him with a flick of his finger. "Or… do you really want me to call you 'My Lord'?"

"Boss is fine," the shadow sighed. "I could actually get used to that, unlike all these other lofty titles..." Age had caught up with him again. His four-hundred years weighed more heavily on him now than they had in the midst of action. "Come back to Nulltime with me. We will have to pause these two for now. Clearly you and I have much to discuss."

Codes of Honor

Too dangerous to hover

Not good to linger here

Roots of indecision

Dig in and disappear

I'm running round in circles

One shoe nailed to the floor

No stomach left for fighting

At least not anymore

- "Grand Experiment", No More Kings

Chapter 23: Codes of Honor

The nausea was slow to pass. Raphael puked until he was getting up nothing but foul, yellow bile. Now he sat on his knees, panting and shaking, jaw stubbornly clenched. He looked like he was willing himself to stop, but wasn't yet confident of success.

"Slow your breath," Leonardo suggested quietly, unable to withhold assistance for all that he fully expected to be rebuffed. "Like you're about to start meditating. Think about strength seeping back into your arms and legs, centering your core."

By some miracle, Raphael heeded his advice. His breathing deepened and healthier colors eventually returned to his clammy face.

The smell of vomit hung thick in the air. "Come on," Leo decided abruptly. "Let's move closer to the surface and get you some fresh air…" He extended a hand to help his brother up, but the other turtle shoved it away roughly and pushed to his feet without assistance. Leonardo regarded him uncertainly for a beat but decided to stick with the plan. He started back the way they'd come, recalling that they had passed some rungs leading up not too far back.

He checked the urge to look back over his shoulder towards Raph. There was no need to do so, no reason other than his own insecurity. He could hear the quiet sloshing of his brother's passage just behind him. They reached the ladder of rungs and climbed two stories without a word exchanged between them.

They emerged in a passage just below surface level. A storm had rolled over the city. What could be glimpsed of the afternoon sky was dark with heavy cloud cover, but the tunnel did not seem gloomy when viewed with eyes long adjusted to near-total darkness. It made the dingy light spilling down in stripes from sporadic sidewalk grates sparkle and gleam with reflections from the falling droplets. Foot traffic above them was minimal thanks to the storm, and the splash and patter of rain muffled all sound.

Leonardo stopped abruptly and faced his brother. By now the silence between them had become a terrible weight. He suspected that Raphael was too angry to speak. *And who could blame him?*

"Raph," he began desperately, though he could think of nothing to say in his own defense. He just couldn't stand another moment of the awful silence and uncertainty.

"I oughta kick your ass for what you did to me," Raphael growled. His golden eyes flashed as they locked with Leo's and his posture tightened like a predator readying to spring. "And what you almost did to Don."

"Yes," Leonardo agreed softly, eyes widening. His face was very still but did not completely hide his dark feelings on the matter. "I have

disobeyed both of my masters. I endangered your life - and betrayed Donatello's privacy and trust. Please - go ahead."

Raphael's brow wrinkled. He looked away with a low, chuffing sound. "Fuck that."

"Raph, I mean it," Leo insisted, taking a step closer.

"I know ya do!" Raphael squared off again and eyed his brother intently. "Exactly why there'd be no point. All right, look. I'll forget it ever happened - on one condition!" He stabbed a finger in Leo's face and demanded, "You're gonna tell Master Splinter what you did to us. You're gonna tell him, so I don't have to. Tell him you need help getting this shit under control." He bared his teeth and leaned in closer. " *We are on your team* , Leo. You cannot be pullin' stunts like this on your own team!"

"I know. You're absolutely right. Now that I have these abilities, the temptation to use them is – too strong, sometimes." Leonardo's gaze clouded with troubled introspection, drifting away from Raphael to stare at the glittering curtain of water and light just ahead of them. After a long pause he ventured, "You... you don't think I should tell both of them?"

"Who, the Ancient One?" Raphael frowned. "How should I know? I've only ever had one *sensei* to worry about." He cocked his head to the side and wondered, "Do you *wanna* tell him?"

Leo still didn't look at Raph, but his negative headshake was too fast – too adamant.

He's scared of the Ancient One, Raphael realized, and very nearly pointed it out. His mouth opened but closed again as he thought about it. The Ancient One was not only *sensei* to the legendary Hamato Yoshi, he was also a grandmaster of the mystical arts. Master Splinter had many names for these: *genjutsu* , *yojutsu, saiminjutsu,* the higher levels of *kuji-kiri* …

Illusion, astral projection, and general purpose mind-fuckery, that's what it really boiled down to. Raph could understand not wanting to piss off a grandmaster ninja with freaky skills like that.

"Look, just tell Master Splinter," Raphael finally assured him. "See what *he* thinks you should do. That's good enough for me."

"All right,' Leo nodded with new determination and met Raph's gaze. "I'll tell Master Splinter everything. I swear it."

"Good," the turtle in red bobbed his head once and let the matter drop. He smirked at his brother and observed, "So… couldn't help noticing that Don owned you back there."

"I know," Leonardo's eyes widened in amazement. "We *were* in his mind, so that would have been to his advantage... Still, I wouldn't have thought it possible!"

Raph snorted and looked sideways at Leo.

"Oh… sorry," Leo mumbled. He flashed a sheepish grin. "That was kind of arrogant, huh?"

"Ya think?" Raph smiled wolfishly. "He did, though. He one-shotted your ass."

"You didn't do much better than I did, if that puking was any indication," Leo pointed out dryly.

"Nah, he clobbered me. But that's nothin' to brag about. The impressive thing is that he clobbered *you.* Maybe not enough to make ya' hurl, but—"

"I did, actually," Leonardo interrupted with a grimace. "Into the canal, before you woke up. Like I didn't get enough of that last night, right?" He shook his head ruefully and touched a hand to his temple. "And my head is *still* ringing from that attack. How did he learn to do that, anyway? I thought Donnie hated the mystic arts as much as you."

Raphael shrugged uncomfortably. "He still does, far as I know. The only *saiminjutsu* lessons he's willing to work on are the ones about how to *defend* ourselves from all of that shit."

"So he's become specialized," Leo mused. "I guess that could explain it. He seems serious about it?"

"Oh yeah. Plenty of times I've been stuck sparring with Mike for the whole session 'cause Don wanted to beef up on that stuff with Splinter. At first I figured it was just a clever stunt he was pullin' to get outta combat training. But, hell… maybe he just didn't want you coming home and using those Jedi mind tricks to find out about all these girls he's been slamming."

Raphael was only half-serious in offering this grumbled supposition, but Leonardo shot him a startled look of understanding. "That's it! It's not just that he's been specializing in defense. He's been preparing *specifically to repel me* . It was a scenario he set up in advance, like a trap! And I walked right into it…"

"Christ, would ya listen to yourself?" Raph reproached, giving his brother's arm a rough shove. "Is that our biggest worry right now? Figuring out how Don managed to beat the Great Leonardo in a magical dual?"

"Okay, first of all – you're the one who brought it up," Leonardo retorted hotly.

Raph scowled at the ground because that was sort of true.

"And second—"

His head snapped up again to blaze, "What did I tell you about fucking *counting at me?"* Raph spread his arms sharply. "Just say what you got to say!"

"What I'm *saying* is," Leonardo shot back sternly. "I don't really care about being defeated. But it's another clue that Donatello has got

something to hide from me. Something big – bigger than sneaking off to – to 'slam girls'!" *As you so crudely put it.*

The mild disapproval in Leo's tone was either ignored or too subtle for Raph to detect. He merely glanced down, chewing the inside of his cheek and thinking about it. "Yeah. You could be right. Guess he did admit to all that when we pressed him, right at the beginning of the stupid Sex Ed lesson."

"Exactly. It's crazy though, isn't it? I wouldn't think Donnie capable of..." Leo paused when he saw Raphael giving him that long, sideways look again and hastened to explain. "I'm not saying he isn't capable of getting laid! I mean the lying. How'd he get away with it for so long? That's what baffles me. He's always been a terrible liar, worse than any of you. He over-thinks his responses, gives himself away every time."

Raphael gave a snort of disbelief. "If you think that's still true, you know him even less than I do."

Leonardo looked so stricken by these words that Raph felt a rare stab of remorse for not having been more tactful. But he didn't take back what he said. His words were blunt but not untrue, and Leo didn't come to him for advice because he wanted to be coddled.

The turtle in blue spent a long time doing nothing but staring into the rain.

Raph figured he must be thinking about what he'd been told and 'half meditating'. He had noticed Leo doing this ever since returning from his solitary jungle lifestyle. His eyes would glaze and go miles away, even though he would still be alert to his surroundings and mostly listening to what people around him were saying. Raphael had decided he didn't mind Leo doing this. If he *had* to meditate (and did he ever, sometimes), then this seemed like a more sensible way to do it than retreating into private and spacing out completely. Raph folded his arms and waited with commendable patience.

Finally, Leo spoke. "You feel this change happened during my absence, or before that?"

"During," Raph admitted. He expected a reaction at these words, but got none. *Must have been the answer he was expecting.* "This past year especially, he's been… he's been real different."

"You've actually caught him being dishonest with you?"

"Big time."

Leo watched him expectantly and eventually prodded, "Anything you can share with me?"

"No." Raphael dropped his eyes and screwed up his face in frustration. "Probably not."

Leo gave him a knowing smirk. They all knew how strongly Raph felt about snitching. "Your personal code of honor can be *so* annoying."

"Yeah? Well, right back atcha, buddy," Raph was quick to retort. He grunted, almost laughing, but his brief mirth was quickly swallowed by some inner turmoil. He stalked several paces away from Leo and accidentally walked into the path of the rain. The turtle shivered in surprise as the cold water struck him and backed out of it. He brushed at his arms in irritation and looked over at Leo. "Look, just... I'll think about it. Lemme get back to ya."

Leonardo studied the other turtle's face intently. "You think telling me might be for his own good," he deduced.

"Maybe," Raph sighed. "Or it might not be an issue anymore, 'cause I handled it." He looked aside and shook his head with regret. "*Badly* , mind ya. It got… it got way too violent."

Leo blinked. "You mean he actually fought back?"

"No," Raph rasped. "'Course not. He NEVER does. And it almost always saves him from getting a real beat-down. Cause how do you

keep hitting someone who won't hit you back? Who barely defends himself? You'd have to be pissed outta your mind or really freaking out about something..." His eyes were distant, his voice hushed and haunted by the memory. "What I'm sayin' is, it didn't save him that night."

"Oh no…" Leonardo had never heard the hothead describe *anything* as "way too violent" – barely thought him capable of the concept. Now he flinched at the onslaught of ugly, heart-wrenching snapshots his mind immediately conjured. In spite of that, he felt no anger. His brother's remorse was far too plain to see. Leo felt nothing but shame and pity for both of them. "I'm so sorry, Raph. It should have been me."

"Yeah, it should've. But can we not dig up all that again? I'm over it."

Now it was Leo's turn to give the long sideways glance.

"I'm *tryin'* to be over it," Raph amended sardonically, his mouth ticking up at one corner, "and doing a pretty bang-up job."

"You're doing great," Leonardo agreed, flashing a bittersweet smile.

The rain was coming down harder now, and the storm drains poured in steady streams like tap water from open faucets. The water level was past their ankles and still rising, creeping up their calves and moving fast enough to sweep away the filth and debris.

Leonardo mentally composed his next question in advance, then delicately asked, "Do you think that confrontation is the reason you and Don are having such a difficult time lately?"

"Nah… he hated me way before that, for probably a hundred stupid bullshit reasons." Raphael answered gruffly. "But it sure didn't help."

"Listen to me, Raph," Leo's gaze was steady and commanding. He didn't say more until his brother lifted his head and looked him in the eye. "Think about how we were at our very worst. I bet there were

plenty of times you thought I hated you. I can't tell you how many of those fights I walked away from, utterly convinced that you hated me. But was it ever true?"

"No," Raph whispered. His face was stoic as ever, but Leo noticed that his eyes were shining.

"Do you think it was true for *either* of us?" Leonardo gripped his brother by the shoulder and squeezed. "The answer is no. Never. You and I were at odds for almost half our lives, Raph – and we've worked things out somehow! So I really don't think this conflict between you and Donatello is insurmountable. You don't actually hate *him* , do you?"

Raphael mutely shook his head.

"Of course you don't," Leo agreed, letting his hand fall back to his side. "Otherwise you wouldn't be so worried about him. You wouldn't care one way or the other. Anyway, hasn't it ever occurred to you that maybe the way he's been acting, or some of the nasty things he's said, might actually have nothing to do with you?"

The other turtle's brow wrinkled. "How'd ya mean?"

Leonardo hesitated, glancing down and briefly debating the pros and cons of saying what he was about to say. He was pretty sure Don wouldn't appreciate his sharing something this personal, told to him in confidence. On the other hand, it seemed important to give Raphael a better perspective of the situation. This seemed a rather small betrayal next to the magnitude of an uninvited mental invasion. He would apologize sincerely for all of his crimes when he and Donatello managed to sit down and talk it out. They were both rational and peace-loving creatures at heart, and had always been able to work out their differences this way in the past.

It was only a shouting match about sexual ethics that devolved into insult-flinging from him and a dirty take-down on your part. Followed by a demand for privacy via blackmail on his part. Followed by

attempted mind rape on your part. Yeah, we'll just sit down and have a chat about all that.

Giving his psyche a firm shake, Leo calmly rejected these dark misgivings. In his mind he isolated the brooding thoughts and cut them out of his mind with two deft slices of an invisible katana. *Ridiculous. We will talk it out and recover from this. Now speak, before Raph grows impatient.*

Leonardo took a deep, centering breath. His eyes opened and sought Raphael's. "A couple weeks ago I had a long talk with Donatello. He told me that a year ago he diagnosed himself with depression. Which matches up pretty well with the time period you gave me earlier when you were talking about how he's changed. Anyway, he said that human anti-depressants are toxic to turtles. He spent months toying with the chemistry, but never managed to produce an anti-depressant that didn't have deadly side-effects." Leo's face creased with sympathy. "He said he had to keep burying baby turtles, and it got to be too much. So he gave up."

"Jesus." Raphael was blankly stunned. He shivered, still wet from the rain. He couldn't tell if the temperature had actually dropped, or if he was merely chilled by what Leo was telling him. "I had no idea."

"I don't think he discussed it with anyone other than Master Splinter. Too proud… or maybe he was afraid of appearing weak in front of the ones he was supposed to be leading. I would have been, in his position."

"I'm no psychiatrist. I mean, I didn't have a clue. But now that you said it, I don't… disagree…necessarily." Raph brought one hand up to scratch at his jaw, looking thoroughly uncomfortable with the subject matter. "Y'know, with the diagnosis. Seems like Don's been havin' a *lotta* feelings lately, and happy ain't one of 'em."

"He's a wreck," Leo agreed wistfully. "He tried to downplay it as he told me this, but he made it clear that he struggles with it to this day."

His brow furrowed and he gave his head a rueful shake, "I'm so mad at myself right now for not thinking about any of this earlier today."

"Nobody was in their right mind earlier today," Raph pointed out. He thought about it for a moment and amended, "Nobody but Mike."

"Mike is Donnie's current treatment plan, you know."

"His what?" Raphael looked at Leo with deeper concern.

"He can't medicate the problem and Splinter's meditation exercises haven't been helping. Next step was to try reconnecting with Mikey. He said he might need a best friend to recover."

Raph's breath hitched with emotion and he looked away sharply. He didn't retreat very long before looking back at Leo. No tears, just shiny eyed again as he admitted, "You're breakin' my heart over here..." His adams apple bobbed with a hard swallow and his jaw set for a moment or two before he asked, "He talked to you about bein' depressed, showed you his treatment plans - but did he say *why* he's all fucked up?"

Leonardo leaned in and spoke with heavy emphasis, " *No.* "

"I mean, what the hell happened?"

"I have no idea. *No one has any idea* . Not Master Splinter, not Mike... I asked him about it point blank. All he would say is that it wasn't my fault or because he was stuck being leader."

"Did he say how much of it was because of me?" Raphael cracked his knuckles fiercely. Leonardo could read him well enough to see it was a nervous gesture, not an angry one.

"He politely refused to say more about it. But I didn't get the feeling it was because of you, and neither did Master Splinter."

"You and Splinter already talked about all this?" Raph was surprised and asked without thinking. Right away he saw it was a stupid

question, but by then the words were out of his mouth.

"Of course." Leo mumbled sheepishly. He ducked his head and continued. "Splinter insists that it's something internal. Our sensei's intuition is usually pretty accurate, and what he has been sensing from Don all the time lately is shame and fear."

"God, Leo..." Raph strode several paces away. He was a pacer and always had been. He had an easier time thinking when he was on the move.

Leonardo said nothing, watching the other turtle trying to process the new information.

"Shit. More than ever, I wanna tell you the reason I gave Don that beat-down. You need to hear it from somebody, especially if he don't manage to convince me that it's not still a problem." He cracked his knuckles again as he retraced his sloshing steps. "But maybe... maybe if I explain to him that we talked. If I say we're done being jerks and we just want to help? I dunno. It might be fine if I could just give him a heads up first. Or at least the chance to tell you himself. He deserves that, don't he?"

"Do it!" Leonardo agreed with this plan wholeheartedly. "I'm burning to hear what you have to say, don't get me wrong – but a personal code of honor is a serious thing to me, Raph. I'm more than willing to respect yours."

"Okay," Raph agreed, stopping in his tracks and looking spooked at what he had just agreed to do. "I'll try."

"But I don't mean you should go right now, either. They probably haven't finished the Sex Ed lesson. And I've got another idea about where we might get some answers. Has anyone tried asking April?"

"April? What would she know about it?"

Leonardo was baffled by this question. "April 'gets' Don. He tells her all kinds of things he's too proud or nerd-conscious to talk about with us."

"Leo," Raph flinched. "I don't think that's true anymore,"

"What? Explain," Leo demanded.

"Things are weird between those two. For awhile her apartment was where he went to get away from *us,* y'know? Even Casey wants to know what happened, because for awhile they were stuck working real different shifts. And it sucked, but at least she didn't act so lonely and clingy back when Don was stopping by on a regular basis. "

"Back up. You said things are weird between April and Don. Weird how?"

"Like... well, he's never *rude* to her. He's nice as can be to her face. But it used to be Don came up with the weakest reasons you ever heard to visit April's place. Now he never needs to go. And when she comes over here, when she just wants to hang out with us..." Raph shrugged helplessly. "He finds the weakest reasons you ever heard to stay in his room or leave the lair completely."

"My God, Raph. That's huge." Leo tugged at his brother's arm to get him moving. "Come on. We are *definitely* paying April a visit."

"Leo, think about it!" Raph frowned but fell into step beside him. "She won't talk to her own fiancé about it. What makes you think she's going to talk to us?"

Leonardo shrugged. "She will or she won't. All we can do is try."

Author's Note:

That's right, song lyrics are back! Because I enjoy them way too much to keep leaving them out. Hopefully FFnet doesn't have a

problem with them! There's some new Talk-related photo manip art on my DeviantArt page. Thanks again to princessebee for the beta read.

Winny

The Truth

OBLIGATORY FLAG-WAVING for some pretty steamy NC-17 material that made it into this chapter. Also more disturbing implications of sexual violence, plus all the usual swearing, recreational drug use, and otherwise inappropriate-for-kiddies content you've probably come to expect from me by now. :D YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!

Winny

You are still a whisper on my lips

A feeling at my fingertips

That's pulling at my skin

You leave me when I'm at my worst

Feeling as if I've been cursed

Bitter cold within

Days go by and still I think of you

Days when I couldn't live my life without you

Days go by and still I think of you

Days when I couldn't live my life without you

Without you

Without you

- "Days Go By", Dirty Vegas

Chapter 24: The Truth

" *Crap, what are you – hey!" Don squirms with surprise. He tosses his pencil onto the pillow beside us, takes hold of my hips, and levels a stern look at me. That look means he is giving serious thought to tossing me off and giving me some lip about how NOT turning in the stupid paper tomorrow will negatively impact his final marks and blah blah stuff with numbers and whatever and so on.*

Thankfully he shuts up and starts looking at me, and it becomes the most adorable thing in the world to watch him weigh his options. First there was sitting there, writing a stupid paper. Let me tell you just how serious of a geek this guy is, okay? It's like, this first option is a totally viable contender. Here I am, having maneuvered my way backwards onto his lap, sneaking him looks full of meaning, and wearing nothing but white stockings up to my thigh, and still he's wondering if he should do his homework or me. His hands feel warmer, suddenly. His palms spread and slide over my hips. One option weighed, he is definitely considering the benefits of me now.

" *You realize you're sitting on the first six pages of my essay on Twist Management," he says in a lower voice. It doesn't sound like his lecturing voice anymore.*

" *Oh wow, I am such a klutz," I say, looking over my shoulder and giving him wide, innocent eyes that he knows better than to believe for a second. Donatello coughs a laugh at my audacity. He throws one arm around me and his strong legs bunch in preparation before hefting me up. His other hand snatches the papers out from under me the moment my weight lifts off of them. He sets me down, off to one side, and tosses his essay out of harm's way. The pages flutter to the floor to land alongside my discarded clothes and his bo staff.*

I slap aside the text book he'd been using as a writing surface, sending it flying out of the pillow pit. It lands ugly, face-down and

bending some of the pages. His eyes widen slightly, distressed at the mistreatment of school property. Or maybe he's just got a reverence for books that I don't happen share - the bigger and boring-er, the better! Books like this are my competition, WAY more so than any of my girlfriends he might sweet talk into bed.

" *Oops," I give him a bright giggle, all roses and sunshine. "You see? So clumsy!"*

" *You... have no respect," he mutters. Don moves in behind me and his large hands sweep up my ribcage. He seizes my tits and squeezes them hard enough to make me squeak.*

" *None at all!" I agree, laughing.*

He brings his face in close behind me, his breath stirring the curve of my ear. "You are a distraction," he tells me, "and a serious detriment *to my grade point average."*

" *Mmmm," I murmur, because his hands feel REALLY good now. He's caught my boobs in two big handfuls, kneading them and twisting my nipples until they're good and hard. I arch my back and rub my shoulder blades against his chest plates, squirm my ass against those hard, muscular thighs. "Don't gotta grade point average, sweetie," I chide him. "That's a third Earth thing, m'pretty sure."*

" *Final tally? It's the same thing!" His hands freeze briefly, annoyed with me for not already grasping this. Thing is, I do grasp it. Right now, I just don't care.*

" *What you need is to learn some* discipline *," he growls. Before I can finish drawing a breath of surprise, he flips me over like I weigh nothing at all and starts spanking my ass hard.*

So. Fucking. Hot.

But I shriek and squeal and ineffectively pound on his legs with my fists, because I know there are few things he loves like a helpless school girl.

The last slap is the hardest. He pulls his hand away and the cool air stings my burning skin. Then relief as his hand massages my ass and thighs. His hands slide up and down and circle and squeeze, and sometimes slide under my ass cheeks and through the tunnel of my thighs to put gentle, touch-and-go pressure on my blonde muff from below. Each time he does this, his hand delves just a little *deeper.*

I've trained him, like, really fucking well.

He teases me like this until the top of his hand is wet and my breathy cries of mock-protest have dissolved into a throaty mewling.

I put my cheek against a pillow and glance up at him through heavy lashes. The way he is looking at me is complex and multifaceted, as it always is. I see a cool scientific observer who is tracking my pleasure on a mental chart and calculating angle and thrust accordingly. But there is also a hungry-eyed reptile in there, lashed to me by some primal cord thrumming between us. He is slowly slinking closer, lured by the smell of my readiness.

His wandering eyes catch on mine. He sees that I am gazing up at him, and the lusty, purring look on my face makes him break into a grin.

The blunt edge of his large index finger and palm slides along the whole length of me, dragging against all the best places. He does this twice, back and forth. The second time makes me close my eyes and groan. By the third pass, he is sinking his thumb into me. Most of his attention is still guiding his index finger, which is grinding and sliding over and around my clit.

Soon I'm fiercely gripping a handful of pillow tassels and rocking my hips against his hand, taking charge of the tempo of this delicious

'finger-gun technique', as he's coined it. He's a lover who values input, and quickly matches the new pace I have set. I drive hard against his hand, pushing where I most want to be pressed right now. He accommodates that too, drives the pad of his finger onto just the right spot again and again until a hot shot of pleasure wraps through my tummy and down the back of my legs and shoots out of my toes. I let out a long, throaty moan as the muscles of my cunt contract and squeeze his thick, green thumb.

I drag in a ragged breath to speak his name.

"Donnie. Oh Donnie, that was so," she whispers, not daring to open her eyes, "beautiful. You're..."

A stupid jerk! Right? Doesn't she hate him? Isn't that what this is all about?

Deep in the core of her, she knows he isn't there, knows she is alone. It is dark but she is surrounded and filled with a glow, a ring of intoxicating candles positioned all around the polished wooden surface surrounding her pillow pit. Pleasure smokes, dissociatives, various body buzzes and psychedelics, all lit together in a way that would make Jonas yank on his hair or Don fiercely lecture. Her eyes creaked open and she watched the smoke tendril and pool in the candlelight above her bed. *They would flip if they were here.*

But they aren't here. I am alone.

Why can I only dream of him ? It wasn't fair! She wanted so badly to hate him, but in her current state it was hard to want anything for very long. It was hard to want anything but his clever fingertips and his big, strong tongue.

All alone in her pillow pit, her personal slice of Nulltime. Her pretty little manor has always been so comforting and familiar, and this room especially: her private sanctuary of decadence and rest. But deep in her core, Renet understands that she has been flung an

inconceivable distance. She is surrounded by brand new worlds, terrifying foreign worlds. Who knows what the turtles will even be like in these worlds?

She is so far away, now – so very far away from almost everyone and everything she's ever known. Lord S. is with her, *of course* he is , but all the rest! Her family, her wealth, and so many friends and lovers... all *so totally* beyond her reach.

Don't think about them right now. You don't have to think at all.

Renet breathed deep and slipped into the next sweet dream.

"Ack... I'm almost ready!"

He wasn't almost ready. It was a minor enough lie, so Titan didn't call him out on it. His justice was nothing if not fair.

He stood by patiently as Jonas leapt into motion, moving over to his vanity and plucking up two bottles of cosmetics, some type of collection tube attached to a coiled neural lead, and three generic, hand-labeled silver canisters that warranted closer inspection – if only because the apprentice's heart raced faster when he handled them. These breakables were all stowed in a small, padded pack that snapped onto his body armor at the hip.

Jonas hadn't been wearing the upper armor, but now he strapped it on over his synthetic leather under-shirt and jacked in all three neural leads. A purple tablet was docked on his forearm. Finally he snagged a small gun off his desk and slid it into a holster on his thigh.

"You aren't going to need that," Titan frowned at the sight of it.

"Umm," Jonas hummed and flushed a darker shade of blue. "Need's a strong word. But if it's all the same to you…"

"There will be no combat."

"It isn't for combat. That's mainly what Hamato did for us, boss – well, that and all his gadgets. If we're relying on *me* for combat, we are seriously fucked."

The Time Lord didn't call him out for stalling or trying to divert the issue, but his eyes hardened and he lowered his chin in warning.

Jonas dropped his eyes and scowled at the floor between them for a moment before extending his forearm to reveal where his body armor had been vandalized. It looked as though some type of acid had been used to eat away a hole on the inner arm joint. A blue circle of his skin was revealed, as well as a thin plastic implant that was embedded there: a flat triangular disc with rounded edges and a small hole in the center. "It interfaces with this."

Lord Titan stepped closer and stared hard at the implant. "What is it?" he demanded flatly.

"There's... uh... not really a word for it in your language."

The foreshadow's stormy blue eyes snapped up. There was an edge to his polite words. His patience was wearing quite thin. "You speak my language *flawlessly,* Jonas. Please do your best."

"It's a..." Jonas dropped his eyes and thought about it, chewing his lower lip in concentration. "Sort of, ah... just gimme a second." His eyes ticked blank and his blinking regulated in a way that anyone who spent much time with him came to recognize as his 'processing large amounts of data' face. "Oh, I got it." He refocused on the Time Lord and flinched with something like embarrassment as he explained, "I guess you guys might call it a... vascular shield?"

The old turtle looked away as if pained. "My brother had an implant like that. He told me it was a data port."

"No. It keeps my veins from collapsing and filters impurities." The biochemist's sharp nails dug at his scalp behind one pointed ear. He wondered idly, "Thought you could tell when people lied to you?"

"That one had a lot of practice at blocking my abilities," Titan blew out a slow breath. "And my efforts to understand him."

"I understand him. Hamato, that is. My *ka'chaiya* in the sphere over there." Jonas waved a hand at the third glowing orb. The image within was frozen on Donatello, capturing his anxious perch on the edge of the kitchen chair and his reluctantly smiling face. The apprentice looked him boldly in the eye and remarked, "I never met this lying junkie you keep talking about."

"Just tell me I'm not going to find one of these *vascular shields* already hidden under his elbow-wraps," Titan demanded.

Jonas replied blandly, "It would truly shock me. The fact that he doesn't IV drugs has always been a point of pride for him."

"Some good news, at last," the ancient ninja grumbled. The sincerity underlying the blue alien's flippant words was not lost on Titan. He cocked his head and wondered, "What's a *ka'chaiya* , anyway? Your translator skipped it."

"Doesn't translate." Jonas reached for the tablet strapped to his arm and traced a few lines and squiggles on the input pad. "Well, it does. Instead of 'he's my *ka'chaiya* ', I could've said, 'he's my platonic friend and housemate with whom I willingly share a long-term sexual partner'. But that's a fucking mouthful for a simple idea, if you ask me."

"Fair enough," said the Time Lord. "But is that word still accurate, now that Renet is out of the picture for both of you?"

"Yes. The term applies specifically to our friendship in spite of the fact that we should have been *ta'chaiyo* , or 'cohabiting sexual rivals', which are way more common. If our friendship outlives the

relationship with our shared partner, this will actually prove he is my *ka'chaiya* beyond a doubt."

"Sounds complicated."

"It's not." Jonas half-smiled. "Ready when you are, boss."

"Then come with me." Titan opened the portal of glowing golden light with a casual wave of his hand.

The spheres were ushered through first, hefted with kinetic force and sent soaring towards the portal to Nulltime. The turtle stood directly half in, half out of his golden portal, marching them through one after the other. Once they were all on the other side and hovering patiently, Lord Titan slipped through all the way and set the precious spheres down on the stone floor. He was careful to keep them in the same order they had been in on the Omatran's space cruiser.

They arrived in a large chamber that Jonas had never seen before. There were several heavy wooden doors. Otherwise, every wall was blank, unadorned stone. He looked around in dismay. "Where are we? I thought…" He didn't complete the thought aloud, but he'd assumed they were going home. With a sudden chill, it occurred to Jonas that he might no longer have a home.

"Not what you were expecting? Yeah, sorry about that. Castle Simultaneous has left the building. So has the Tilley Estate." Lord Titan considered the bare walls and flashed a brief, apologetic smile. "I've had bigger things to worry about than interior decorating. Not sure it would be appropriate, anyway… Little Mike should have that honor." He walked over to the nearest door and opened it. "But I did bring a house-warming gift."

Jonas ventured toward the open door uncertainly. He peeked inside and saw what looked like a vast, dark warehouse. Titan flipped a few switches near the door and several rows of massive florescent lighting fixtures spilled stark illumination down onto the nearest aisles. Huge rows of industrial shelving held long white boxes,

continuing into the darkness as far back as his sensitive eyes could pierce. Each shelf had clearly labeled headings, indicating a filing system that made little sense to Jonas. Peering at one of the shelves directly opposite the door, he read "Marvel – Bronze Age – A-D". The alphabetization of titles seemed logical enough, but the first category was mostly lost on him - as were the many metallurgy references.

There was a cozy nook situated to the right of the door. A soft, well-worn carpet had been spread over the concrete under a pair of comfortable arm chairs. A sturdy end table was wedged between the chairs, on which stood a lamp that spilled warm yellow light from a battered accordion shade. The far wall closest to this reading nook was lined in wooden shelves. The spines of these books were so varied in size and brightly colored, they could not possibly be academic in nature.

"It's my near complete collection of Earth's comics and graphic novels," The Time Lord explained, surveying the room with obvious pride.

"What… all of them?" Jonas blinked.

Lord Titan shook his head gravely. "Uranium Age Silver Surfer volume 3, issue 44, variant cover D…" The grin he flashed at Jonas was briefly maniacal as he pointed a finger skyward. "There's always a white whale!"

Even a triple-live connection to the DataBank couldn't help the Omatran puzzle out what giant ocean-dwelling mammals had to do with a metallic water-sport enthusiast, but it didn't seem important enough to ask for clarification. "This your secret weapon?" he murmured, letting his gaze wander back to the lovingly organized warehouse. "You need the new kid to accept the supreme mantle of Time Lord, so you think - let's bribe him with some comic books?"

"Not just *some* comic books," Titan corrected with a faint frown.

Jonas flicked his gaze back to correct himself dryly, "All the comics."

" *Nearly* all the comics." The wrinkled terrapin nodded sagely. "Still. It's brilliant, right? And he'll have all the time in the world to read them."

"From what I have seen of him so far?" Jonas gave a subdued chuckle. "Yeah. It's probably going to work."

Titan's eyes became serious and a little more genuine as he explained, "The truth is, he doesn't need a bribe. He'll accept for Donatello's sake – and for his own, I think."

"What do you mean, for his sake? You got to *choose* whether or not to serve as foreshadow, but *he* didn't sign up for this. Okay, yeah. He did sign up, technically. But you and I both know that Little Mike was duped. You think he'll be happy he signed that petition once he understands the *work* involved, the *isolation* , the *massive* responsibilities they're going to - "

"Yes," Titan cut him off impatiently. "The Mantle of Time requires all those things at times. But it also makes a promise of *many* more adventures yet to come. These 'massive responsibilities' you speak of… I believe he will call this 'being a hero'. It will come naturally, as it always has. If he can pull this off, he'll never get any weaker, never grow old or tired. He'll never have to give up the fight until he's good and ready. It's what he's always wanted, in a lot of ways."

Jonas blew out his held breath and nodded slowly. "Okay, boss. It just concerns me because, at the moment, his will trumps both of ours."

"There will be no will to trump, I assure you. He will accept the mantle when he understands that Donatello's continued existence in this universe depends on it. Any rationale beyond that – his misgivings, the ways he might benefit personally from the arrangement – all of these are incidental."

"Fine. I trust you," Jonas said in his scratchy, neutral voice, his shoulders hitching in the slightest shrug. "I'll put it out of mind. Hey,

how'd it go fending off that surprise attack from Leo?"

"Oh… I fucked it up, actually." Titan's face was self-depreciating and abashed, just for a moment. Then he harrumphed and went on to assure him, "Not completely. I mean, I *stopped* the damned fool from invading Donatello's mind, so ultimately the endeavor *was* successful! But…"

"But you fucked something up," Jonas prompted. There was no scolding in his voice, just coolly taking in the new facts. "How bad are we talking?"

"The encounter with Leo went exactly as I had foreseen. He was deflected, and now he has every reason to believe Donatello capable of defending himself against any future attempts. If he does try it again, and it's not looking likely, then it will not be for quite some time, and after much training in the defensive arts on Leonardo's part. No... the fuck up was this: *Raphael was there.* "

"Raphael? That one doesn't *do* magic."

"I know, believe me! It was still Leo's attack, and entirely his effort – but he brought Raph somehow! The truth is, I didn't even notice him until after I'd banished Leo back to his body. He was stealthy and quiet, but understandably terrified – and that's what gave him away to me. He was shaking head to tail, but he gets up, and he actually starts apologizing! I'm thinking 'shit… Don really needs to hear this stuff!' So I say the first stupid thing that pops into my head. I tell him, "Why don't you tell me that to my face, coward?' and I banish him too. Only afterwards does it occur to me, why this isn't an *ideal* situation…"

"Because if he actually takes that advice, and goes to talk it out with Hamato – whose mind was never actually *invaded* – gotcha. Yeah, that could be bad."

"I'm just going to roll with it, I think," Titan decided, bobbing his head slowly.

"You're what?" Jonas laughed with surprise.

"Yeah, I'm going to roll with it! Hopefully he doesn't have the nerve to actually follow through and apologize. But I'm thinking it might come back around in other ways, open him up to some new sympathy for Don? Something like that – because I did another forecast, and my projections for those two have improved *significantly* since I intervened. Originally they were on a path to be estranged for many years to come, and that's in keeping with the reality I lived through. But now there's this other possibility that I've got my eye on… Anyway, stay tuned! It could still blow up in our faces and become the next big reason to reset. But we're going to roll the dice on this one."

Jonas had widened his eyes at some point during the telling of that tale. He bobbed his head and agreed, "Whatever you say, boss. You know what you're doing."

Titan nodded towards the door leading back to the main hall where they'd left the spheres. The blue alien took the cue, falling into step beside him as Titan lead them towards the door. "So that was my mistake. Now let's discuss yours, if you don't mind."

"Right." Jonas frowned and thought about it for a beat. "Uh, can you be more specific?"

"The one you taunted me with earlier? You're 'probably the only one who can give me the inside scoop on how badly we've fucked up'—" Lord Titan lifted one brow ridge pointedly as he held the door. "– remember?"

"Ah! The big one." The Omatran ducked his head, vaguely sheepish as he slipped past. "Just – you know, making sure."

"So, walk me through it. Or better yet, let me walk you through what I was lead to believe by the Council of Time, and then you can show me which parts are wrong."

"Fine by me." Jonas shuffled alongside him, moving to stand with him before the row of viewing spheres.

The terrapin focused in a way that could be subtly felt in the air, like proximity to high voltage or emotional tension. "Fifth sphere," he intoned, and the faintly glowing orb blazed a solid white in response to his command. "Show me the sealed footage from April O'Neil's condominium on May 7th, 2006." He plucked the globe up, stand and all, and brought it floating closer with a lazy gesture.

Colors were blooming within the viewing sphere, indistinct at first but swiftly resolving into two familiar figures: Hamato and his redhead getting hot and heavy on the cream-colored couch. Jonas found himself studying her again, though he must have watched this scene play out at least fifty times before. He'd seen it often enough that he was no longer shaken to his core by the gore that would soon follow.

Not for the first time, he found himself wondering why this woman – this Earthling with her small breasts, mature belly and hips, in her very unglamorous t-shirt and plain cotton panties – had such incredible power over his friend. The shirt came off in short order, and the brassiere beneath it was equally underwhelming. Hamato made quick work of that too, tearing it off her with an efficient snap of torn fabric. That first flash of discomfort crossed her face, making Jonas want to look away or at least focus someplace else. He shifted several steps aside to find another angle, one that better revealed her tiny pink nipples. They didn't help to stir anything inside him. She wasn't ugly, but she didn't hold a candle to the lovely ladies that typically made up Renet's entourage.

"Let's speed this up. Three times faster, please. We don't need a blow-by-blow." Titan's tone was clipped and stoic, but the grim set of the terrapin's jaw made it clear that this was not the most pleasant task he would face in his new role. He set the globe down on the ground gently in front of them and the two of them watched the scene. "Omit sound!" he added sharply. Even sped up, the change in her cries had become obvious. "Okay. Here we have the-" There was an agonized pause,"Event. Unfolding. And..."

The Time Lord fell silent. Eventually he rubbed his eyes and muttered, "Jesus."

"It's okay, boss," Jonas tried to comfort the ancient terrapin's growing distress with an awkward pat on the arm. "It never happened, remember? We made sure of it."

"I know. I got this," the Time Lord assured himself. He took a steadying breath and forced his hands to un-clench. "It's just hard watching this happen - and to April, of all people. You don't understand what she means to us."

"Got an idea what she means to *him,* " the Omatran remarked, jerking a short nod towards the viewing sphere. "But... all of you? Really? That must be some woman."

"She is," Titan agreed, still dismayed but unable to tear his spooked eyes from the sphere. He murmured, sounding vague with distraction, "We may not love her in quite the same way *Donnie* does, but she's family . "

"Here's the thing, though." The skinny apprentice jerked one thumb at the red-head. " *She* is not our mission. This O'Neil lady, she is doing just fine. Never followed him through time, so she doesn't know anything about this stuff. Worrying about her right now is a wasted effort, boss."

It was the wrong thing to say, perhaps. Hamato would have heard him out. He would have appreciated the separation of emotion and logic in what he was saying, but apparently these two brothers were cast from different molds. His words earned a look from Titan that was coldly reprimanding. "She's *family,* do you hear? You're gonna to have to bear with me."

He also may have heard the truth in what his new apprentice was saying in spite of the reprimand, because he did turn back to the sphere and refocus on the mission at hand. "So... he realizes what happened, gathers her up, and carries her out to the car. Faster

here, give me... five times speed? Okay. So, Don breaks into the nearest clinic. He wastes time with imaging equipment and sees more damage than he knows what to do with. Realizes he's losing her and finally gets her to Lenox Hill Hospital. All accurate so far?"

"Sorta, yeah, I mean," Jonas mumbled, reaching up and yanking on some hair at the base of his skull. "That's definitely how it went down right before we got involved."

"Here's what the council can't seem to understand, and I'm right there with them. From the moment all this started, right up until he jumps, this was what – three hours, total? Why is a three hour patch giving us so much damn trouble? Why is the mere *mention* of the events inside this minor patch threatening the verse with such a massive paradox implosion?"

The apprentice's sylvan eyes widened. "We, uh, don't really delve too deep into the mechanics of paradox implosions in the second grade? But I could take a guess..." Jonas moved in closer to the armored old turtle and tucked his chin to whisper, "Boss, let's go visit the source. Maybe you'll see things differently from there."

Titan's face wiped blank with surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Can we not-?" Jonas looked around nervously, still pointedly whispering. "Why don't you open a quick portal for us? Go straight to the source if you want to see some interesting footage." Titan's Shadow flashed him a look that was so disturbed by this suggestion that the apprentice shook his head quickly and amended, "Look, I don't mean – go to the day before that, even! It doesn't matter."

"Fine. Let's see the day before the incident." Titan made a slow circular gesture with one finger. Jonas startled to realize that the golden portal was being drawn in the air around both of them.

Moments later they were standing in the frozen past.

Jonas waved a hand and started to explain the moment they had privacy, knowing the Council had no eyes into this place now that it had been officially sealed. But they could petition for remote viewing rights at any time, so it seemed wise to speak up quickly. "Those spheres back there – the very spheres we took on trial before the Council? Well, they've been compromised. Hacked, if you will. I helped, but it was mostly Hamato. We had to recreate the whole thing inside of a – ahh, hang on." He processed for about ten seconds before coming up with, "We took one of the spheres into a matter projection room? Hamato calls it a holodeck, but he showed me the show and there are a lot of differences... never mind. Anyway, my job was mostly just to hook him up with the right tech to view and record the way energy moves inside the spheres while they're active, or – or something?" He huffed a sigh. "And uh, we used my chemistry to seal the glass back together. That was my favorite part. But all the encoding of the fake footage, translating it into something the spheres could understand, right? The *really* illegal part, mucking around inside the sphere to begin, willfully falsifying records, to say nothing of blatantly lying to the whole Council of Time while on trial?"

The whole time Jonas was speaking, Titan said nothing. He stared with what looked like frozen horror.

The blue alien yanked on a few spikes of hair and flinched. "So, yeah. You can probably figure out from here why we don't want the Council to actually *find out* about Hamato's crimes."

"Dude," the old turtle's round blue eyes seemed huge when fully widened, his thin, spotty eyelids all but disappearing. "What footage could possibly be worth the risk and hassle of changing it?" Titan dragged his stunned gaze off Jonas and finally began to take in his surroundings, scanning O'Neil's living quarters with a fresh analyzing gaze. "What the hell did you need to *hide* so badly?"

The Omatran raked his lower lip over his teeth for a moment before admitting, "About eleven months."

Jonas watched the Time Lord drink in the unaltered past, noting everything that was changed or had been absent in the forged footage. A well-loved leather messenger bag was hanging on the coat rack. A dart board on the wall, studded with two darts and three shuriken. Two additional shelves lined the far wall, each crammed past capacity with books. Her bill-paying desk was now a second computer workstation, one with joysticks instead of mice and an oversized keyboard augmented with alien keys. The Dilbert calendar on the wall now read 2007.

Titan got it right away. "Oh my God," he whispered. "Oh my God, he *lives* here."

Mistress Tilley was putting out the candles one by one, her white face pinched in an unlovely scowl.

"Nnnn… no." Her soft, clumsy hands pawed at one of the remaining candles, trying to protect it. She only managed to knock it over. Oily red wax pooled on the glossy wood and the candle went out anyway. Lights came on, making her eyes sting and stream tears at the sudden intrusion. "Stoppit! I said stoppit! Turn that off and GO 'WAY!"

"What exactly are you trying to accomplish here, you little fool?" Her voice was so irksome. It reminded Renet of her mother on a nagging tirade. "There is no one left to rescue you."

"Pfff… rescue! Someone needs to rescue your FACE." Renet burrowed deeper into the pillows, muffling the rest of her angry muttering, "Stupid future me, y'spoil everything. Just lemme 'lone!"

"Let you alone to wallow after Donatello and scramble both our brains? No, I don't think so."

"Wallow? You think… Lissen', I am NOT wallowing! Don can just… he can… I don't *care* about him! We're through!"

Strong hands seized her, dragged her bodily from the pillow pit. Dragged her up into the hazy, tingling air. Fierce stone hands, grasping claws pinching her arms. "What were you thinking?! You go to *evil* lengths to keep him, only to throw him away!"

She thrashed, limp and helpless, fierce as an angry kitten in her foreshadow's iron grip. "We hate him! We don't need him! FUCK HIM!"

"You stupid bitch! Just who do you think you are fooling?" The air lit up around them, crackling with power. Renet kicked her feet and connected with only air. They drifted higher now, with twin clouds of their golden hair floating weightless in the air around them. Her foreshadow's radiant face was very close to hers. Her eyes had blazed into twin lamps of blue-white flame. "A THOUSAND YEARS FROM NOW, HIS NAME WILL STILL BE ON OUR LIPS!" Renet's blood sang with panic. It felt as though the heat of her foreshadow's wrath singed the skin of her eyes. She could feel her coiled arms and pretty face starting to blister and boil. "A THOUSAND YEARS FROM NOW, WE WILL REMEMBER ALL THE WAYS THAT WE HAVE WRONGED HIM!"

"No!" Renet whimpered. She tried to twist away and failed, finding no purchase but empty air. She curled into a fetal ball, wrapped her arms around her head, and shivered. "No, no, no…"

They were moving now. Her murky bedroom was sliding past and coming at her from strange gelatinous angles. Somewhere far away she could hear a young girl sobbing.

A fierce grip encircled her. They were plummeting. Renet cowered as the doorway yawned and swallowed her.

"Shhh… that's enough. You're safe now. I've got you."

"I don't know how to fix him." Her mouth was betraying her. Her traitorous, trembling mouth. "I don't know how to fix anything!"

"Indeed. You're too addled to stand, let alone solve your problems. But there's plenty of time now." The white blaze of her eyes quickly tempered with an unexpected well of kindness. "I'm sorry for losing my temper. Now, come. Into the shower with you."

The younger Time Mistress groaned in protest, clinging, and still shivering violently. The water seared her naked flesh with too many sensations. She wasn't cold, but her teeth wouldn't stop clacking and knocking together. Mistress Tilley's white robes, normally so long and flowing, now hung limp and dripping wet, clinging semi-translucent against her generous curves. She didn't seem to notice or care.

"Hurts," Renet bowed her head and began to truly weep. "It hurts."

"I'm sorry about that too." Soft hands stroked waterlogged clumps of hair away from her face. Her foreshadow's eyes weren't flames anymore – they were pale blue and bottomless when she smiled. "This cleansing spell takes time, but it's the safest way."

Renet crumpled and buried her face against the soft white shoulder of her future self. "There's no one left," she sobbed. "I have no one."

"Stupid, silly girl… don't you see it's for the best? A new flock of worlds to discover, a fresh start... It will be good for us! Just wait and see. " The water and her words were pounding, drilling, relentless. "You say you have no one. The truth is that you need no one. Anyway, don't you think it's well past time we learned how to take care of our self?"

[Roll end credit music]

Hey brother, do you still believe in one another?

Hey sister, do you still believe in love, I wonder?

Oh, if the sky comes falling down for you,

There's nothing in this world I wouldn't do.

What if I'm far from home?

Oh, brother I will hear you call.

What if I lose it all?

Oh, sister I will help you out!

Oh, if the sky comes falling down for you,

There's nothing in this world I wouldn't do.

- "Hey Brother" by AVICII

Author's Note: Thanks to Princessebee for being my beta yet again. Also thanks to the my mysterious yet loyal anonymous reviewer "M" for all the feedback and also for leaving my 300th review! KameTerra, thanks to you also for making my heart brim with joy every time I read your detailed responses!

The Beatdown

I can't believe what you tell me

So I just look away

When you realize you fail me

Lying right through your teeth

Anything I see in you,

Everything I thought I knew goes away

With every word you say

You betray me!

Can you see the other side of things?

Can we be more than we have become?

I can see that you've got something to hide,

Something to hide behind those eyes

- "Something To Hide", Of Mice & Men

Chapter 25: The Beatdown

They were back in familiar tunnels now. Running after Leo didn't take any mental effort. Especially not in these tunnels stretching between the lair and Casey's place. He could have run them drunk or asleep on his feet. Right now he was neither, and it left his mind free to wander.

Unfortunately, his stubborn mind refused to do him that favor. Almost the whole way to their apartment, Raphael couldn't stop thinking about Don.

He thought about the shipment of stolen pills they had fought over while on patrol late one night.

" *It would just be seized as evidence, Raph! I know it seems like overkill, but I can break this down into smaller dosages, no problem! An opportunity like this doesn't happen very often. I don't think any of you realize the hassle I go through keeping my field kit and the med cart at the lair stocked with painkillers for medical emergencies. The laws and regulations surrounding scheduled drugs just get more and more convoluted every year..."*

But those were calmer days. There was *no reason* not to believe him. Raph had given in.

And then what happened? Everything happened. Leo didn't come home on the day he was supposed to. Splinter got really sick. And for a while there, Don fucking lost it.

He didn't want to patrol anymore. He didn't want to run the rooftops. He didn't want to go topside with them at all except when he needed specific parts or supplies. He would usually mumble something about undue stress on Splinter's heart, but Raph knew the real reason Don didn't want to patrol anymore was because *Don didn't want to patrol anymore.* He knew this because Donatello also dragged his feet when it was time to train, and he didn't do any more cardio or strength conditioning beyond what Master Splinter demanded of them.

And then, when Donnie would fly off the handle about something stupid, like seeing a sink of dirty dishes or double-digits in his bank account, he would have the nerve to claim that *Raph* was the one not pulling his weight on the team.

He thought about one piss poor dojo performance after the next.

" *What the hell is wrong with you? Why am I getting this close to you so quickly? Defense is supposed to be your* thing , *man!"*

" *I dunno, Raph. I'm tired. Can't you just take the win?"*

" *Tired! Are you sure you're not drunk? I should* not *be able to get past your guard like this. You know what, forget it. I'm gonna spar with Mike. This morning with you has been a fucking travesty!"*

But he was doing better in the dojo lately… a *lot* better. At least there was that.

A thought struck him like a punch to the throat. He'd never let Don know that he appreciated it, never even let it show that he had noticed. It hadn't occurred to Raph at the time, that he should have to praise one of his brothers for something they were supposed to have been doing all along. But what if it was a bigger deal than he had realized? Maybe Donnie could've used his support.

Raphael hoped like hell that his lingering suspicions would be proven wrong. He thought again about Don's renewed effort and dramatic improvement in the realms of combat and physical training. This could be a sign that the Brainiac was getting better. After hearing everything Leo had to say, a lot more things made sense now. He could see how it might've been depression all along...

Raphael could have told Don a thing or two about depression if he'd ever had the guts to ask. They didn't seem to express it in the same ways. Raph, for example, certainly didn't want to kick and stab and punch things any *less* when he was feeling low. Then again, maybe it was just that anger and violence didn't go hand-in-hand for Don the way they did for Raph. This was a guy who showed his anger in subtler ways: the many eye rolls, irritated sighs, words muttered under his breath, or cutting sarcasm. He may not want to fight physically, but he was plenty angry.

He thought about other ways it made him feel. Maybe... separate from the others. Unworthy of them. Unworthy of anything.

Is that how you're feeling, brother?

Not like it hadn't been a shitty couple of seasons for everyone. Nobody made it through unscathed. Mike started leaving the lair without permission, and he would come home smelling like pot and spray paint and sometimes cigarettes. And as for Raphael… he had become the Nightwatcher.

Raph wished he could believe it was all for the good of New York, chasing violence as a solo vigilante warrior. But he wasn't one to fool himself, not about something so obvious. He knew better than to compare himself to Leonardo or the big-hearted heroes in Mikey's comic books.

He knew there was unhealthy release in it. He knew there was a great big *fuck you* in it.

On some level he must have assumed that Mike and Don had the same motivations. It sure felt like a big fuck you to Raph at the time, especially when those two tried Mike's favorite release *together* one night. He had taken one look at Don – at Mike's bong in his lap, at the smoke trickling through the fingers that were lifted to partly cover the lower half of his guilty face – and tore off in a fury.

" *Raphael, wait! No... stay here, Mikey. Please let me handle this. RAPH! Hold up, will you?"*

" *Don't talk to me, Don. I can't even look at you right now."*

" *Listen, I just, give me a chance to explain! That wasn't, ah—"*

" *You kidding me? Are you seriously gonna stand here and tell me that wasn't what it looked like back there?"*

" *Well, no. I'm not going to insult your intelligence. Obviously you caught us red-handed. I only wanted to—"*

" *Great. Glad we cleared that up!"*

" *Raph! Will you stop walking away from me and listen? For two seconds, please? I just, I want to assure you that you don't have to worry about, um. Back there. That wasn't – uh, typical. I mean, I'm not a pothead, and have no plans to become one. That was actually the first time I ever—"*

" *There shouldn'ta been a first time! Not for you, and not for him! But especially not for you. Don't you get it? By trying it with him, it's like you're encouraging him to keep getting fucked up. It ain't right!"*

" *Well, that's debatable. I'm actually... sorta pro-legalization? Not because I want to be able to smoke it myself necessarily, but for numerous economic and political reasons..."*

" *Nobody gives a flying fuck, Don! Nobody's gonna let you vote in a human election, anyway!"*

" *Look, Raph, I'm not... articulate enough… presently to, um, to explain to you how I participated in the last three elections, so… uh. I don't think I'm communicating very well. I'm just going to start over. What I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry. I disappoint you. I get that. But seriously, this stuff tonight? You have nothing to worry about."*

" *Oh yeah? I got fucking plenty to worry about. My dad is sick, one brother either died or ran away, and the other two are doing drugs."*

" *Now you're just being dramatic."*

" *I gave you two seconds and then some. Now get the fuck out of my way."*

They knew how he felt about all that shit. More importantly, they knew how *Leo* would have felt, and they still didn't care.

Sometimes he used to torment himself with the idea that Leonardo had returned tragically early. Homecoming Day was almost upon them when they finally noticed that the lair had become a pigsty after a year without their resident neat freak. They had gone on a fairly

impressive cleaning rampage, but in this masochistic daydream Raph imagined it had been too late. He pictured Leonardo slipping in undetected late one night, stepping over their clutter and filth, and he would look upon them with a magical, all-knowing gaze and in an instant he would know all of their sins. And he would be so weary and disappointed and fed the hell up with all of them that he turned and walked back out the door, never to be heard from again.

It was good to be proven wrong sometimes. Now if only someone would prove him wrong about those god-damned pills.

Ideally, Don himself would prove it. Raph wanted so badly to believe that it was just a one-time mistake, the screwed-up end of a screwed-up day.

It really was one of the worst days he could recall, ranking right up there with Splinter's collapse and Homecoming Day itself. It was the last attempt they had made to patrol the streets of New York City without Leonardo.

Just tell me that's all it was, Donny-Boy… a really bad day.

Donatello hadn't wanted to go at all, but that was nothin' new. In the end, it took repeated promises from Splinter that he was feeling fine, and would even welcome a peaceful night of uninterrupted television after a day of so much bickering and strife. He promised Donatello that he wouldn't raid the freezer for cake, and also to call if he felt even the slightest symptom.

And after all that, Don still *hadn't wanted to go – for his own reasons, I was pretty sure – but since he didn't feel like sharing those reasons, he got trumped by the rest of us. I'd be lyin' if I told you I didn't get some petty satisfaction out of watching him splutter and submit.*

He dragged his feet, and had to mess with the security system first for some reason, and took forever getting his bag of tricks

assembled. He also made a few aggravating comments that I suspected were attempts to start an argument with me. I'm not sure if it was supposed to be a stall tactic, or maybe he thought he could get out of patrolling if I would do him the favor of blowing up and storming off. I wasn't about to fall for any of his manipulative crap, and gave his stupid remarks no more response than a lazy shrug or a disdainful prod, like, "Would'ja hurry the fuck up already?"

By the time the three of us made it up to the surface, Donatello's motivation level had done a one-eighty. He was filled with a nervous energy that set my teeth on edge. He was twitchy and talkative - more chatty than Leo would have put up with during a topside run, I'm pretty sure.

On the one hand, Mike was eating up all the attention and fresh opportunities to banter. And it's not like the angry drunk trying to choke his woman in an alley proved to be a real challenging foe for us, right?

But on the other hand, every other word out of his mouth was ticking me off.

Maybe it was getting under my skin because one of the things I used to really love about working alongside Don was that he always knew when to shut the fuck up and focus. I'm not just talking combat, but working on cars and large appliances, construction, maintenance shit like running cables or laying pipe – and not just work, but even lifting weights, watching an intense movie together, or leaving in secret to test the top speed and maneuverability of Don's crazy homemade subterranean vehicles with methods that Splinter and Leo could never find out about… you know. All the awesome shit we used to do, back when we could stand each other.

All these ways that he was changing… I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

In the end, I kept my mouth shut. Whatever, I thought. Let them have their fun. It's a slow night, anyway.

It probably would have been fine if we hadn't run into the Foot Clan.

One second we were alone on a rooftop, looking out over the city. The next we were surrounded by enemies on three sides with our shells facing a six-story drop.

I think I said something cocky like, "Check it out, guys! We're finally getting some real action!" I was fronting, of course - for whose benefit, I'm not really sure. But it had been a rotten day from the start, the sort of day that makes you think youd'a been better off just stayin' in bed.

" *Aww, shit," Mike remarked, which was a lot closer to how I was feeling about this fight.*

They weren't a full force. Karai wasn't there - neither were any higher ranked Foot that I could recognize. I don't think they meant to cross our path, just spotted us at random. We must've been too tempting of a target to leave alone. Maybe they were trying to impress their higher-ups, who knows?

Normally a dozen or so on three ain't terrible odds, even if it's Foot ninja. We just didn't have our shit together. It had been too long since we faced flesh-and-blood foes as a team.

They didn't do us the favor of fighting us one at a time. Four ninja rushed me simultaneously, and it took all my attention just to keep their initial attacks from landing. I knocked out one of the four right away and leapt over him, unwilling to stay flanked, unwilling to give them a stationary target.

It gave me the space I needed for a quick glance around to check the status of the others. Four on Mikey, but they couldn't pin him down or land a blow. He was all over the place like usual, chucks spinning, evading them with fancy tumbles, and laughing at his enemies. In spite of his initial reluctance at the sight of them, he was determined to have a good time.

Don was surrounded but keeping his attackers at bay with his whirling bo staff, punishing anyone who got too close. Already one of the Foot was cradling a badly broken arm. I didn't like the shine of sweat on Don's skin, not when the fight had only just begun, and decided I'd better go help him out.

One of my original attackers came at me with a flying kick. I side-stepped and grabbed the pajama-wearing motherfucker as he was landing, redirecting his momentum and swinging him to collide with the other two. That gave me the clearance I needed to rush the wary circle of ninja surrounding Don. I attacked the nearest of them, coming at him from behind (honor be damned) and striking the back of his head hard with the butt of my sai. Don made good use of the distraction, surging forward and clocking another ninja with a precise blow. Both slumped to the ground in unconscious heaps.

Our eyes met over their fallen bodies and Don gave me a small nod of acknowledgement, maybe even thanks.

But I'd chosen poorly. I should'a gone for Mike. I hear him yelp with pain and turn towards the sound.

It's a horrible sight: Mike, his face twisted in a grimace, his hands locked around the hilt of a throwing blade sunk deep in his calf. He's down on one knee beside a defeated foe, but now he is unable to run from the remaining Foot who are simultaneously closing in on him

" *Mike!" I yell, and Don whirls to take in what I have already seen. I abandon the enemies that have been attacking Don in favor of defending Mike.*

We're both drawing the same conclusions. We both run to get nearer to him. I am immediately desperate to help. We've been through so much this past year. All I can think is, not Mike! I can't stand to lose Mikey too. Sometimes I think he's the one who is really holding this family together. More than anyone, it's been him.

I was closer, so I reach him first. I pull out the knife, tear my mask off, and toss it at him. "Tie it off!" I shout, then I'm back up to face the enemies that had been closing in on him.

Don's on them already. He cracks another across the head, drops him to the floor.

" *Behind you!" I shout, seeing a small, wiry ninja leaping at him with a drawn knife.*

Don whirls, using his momentum to propel him, and nails the incoming ninja so quickly that I don't see much more than a blur. The sound of his bo staff connecting is all wrong. It isn't the usual 'crack' of solid wood on skull. It's more of a wet crunch.

" *No," I hear Donnie gasp. He drops to his knees and reaches for the fallen Foot ninja, drawing the masked head into his lap. Then he's shaking his head, pleading under his breath. "Nonono…" His hands explore the wound delicately, checking the extent of the damage to his enemy's shattered throat.*

There is no hope for this guy. I can tell at a glance.

" *Don!" I shout, looming over him, trying to snap him out of it. "Don, it happens! This dude is Foot clan. He'd a killed you if he got the chance. He ain't worth fallin' apart!"*

" *Not 'he'," Don croaks, looking up at me with liquid eyes. "K-kunoichi…!"*

Aw, shit. When I look more closely, I can see the feminine swell of her hips, her breasts, her slender gloved hands and tiny feet. He's right.

" *Then SHE ain't worth it!" I savagely insist, once I'm over my moment of shocked hesitation. "What's between her legs don't make a damn bit of difference. She's the enemy!" I'm full of shit, though. I'm just saying what I think he needs to hear. I mean, it* shouldn't

make a difference. My head knows that. There are obvious exceptions, like Karai or that crazy roid-raging bitch who wanted to film us and put us in a documentary. But for the most part we are a LOT more used to defending women than fighting them. So it does make a difference, for some reason. If I was in his situation, I know it would matter to me.

I don't think he's listening. He needs to torture himself, I guess – pulls off her mask to look at her face. Blood is bubbling from her full dark lips and sliding over her delicate chin. I can see that she's young, probably not much older than me.

The Foot are hanging back now, watching us warily. They seem to be deferring to the one guy who has stepped forward. I straighten, ready for whatever attack he is about to launch at us. Instead he tosses his ninjato down purposefully, letting it land with a clatter, and hoarsely murmurs, "Watashi no ai…"

Don skirts a startled look at him, then back down at the dying girl in his lap. He fumbles in his bag for a cheap ballpoint pen, of all things, and snaps it in two.

" *Don!" I warn him sharply. As much as it sucks, we've got no business saving the life of the enemy when one of our own is down. He ought to know better. Splinter would never approve.*

The Foot in charge doesn't wait for whatever Don was planning to do with the broken pen. He sweeps forward suddenly and scoops the fallen girl into his arms. Donatello makes a strangled sound as she is snatched away. He holds out the broken pen and desperately explains, "She can't breathe! Y-you've got to make a tube, drive it in below the… below the injury..."

I don't think the dude speaks any English, or maybe he just doesn't trust us. It's hard to tell when their masks hide their faces completely. In any case, he ignores the pen and backs away from us.

Mike is back on his feet by now, and some of the ninja have roused their fallen comrades or slung them over one shoulder. They've suffered too many losses and are covering one another as they melt back into the shadows. It's clear this fight is over.

We head home, mostly in silence. At one point Don shoots me a guilty look and mutters, "Sorry. For… back there."

" *Forget about it," I tell him. It's all I can come up with, such a useless thing to say. "Let's just get Mike home."*

" *I'm fine!" Mike insists, even though he's pale and sweating and we can all see how his face twists with every landing as we move from roof to roof. It's a tough call, sticking to the rooftops instead of descending into the sewers, but Don's right: we gotta minimize the chance of infection. We've understood for ages now that open wounds and raw sewage aren't the greatest mix.*

Once we're home Don drops into doctor mode, methodically cleaning and binding Mike's injury. I hang around, trying to be supportive, but mostly I feel awkward and in the way. It's hard not to feel responsible. More than anyone, I'm the one who pushed for tonight's adventure. But aside from fetching clean water and updating Master Splinter, there's not much left for me to do. I tell sensei about the accident with the kunoichi, but not that Don freaked out and tried to save her. I figure he knows by now that he fucked up. After what he's been through tonight, I didn't want him to get lectured too.

I'd planned to go out on my own that night. I was going out most nights, and a part of me was beyond restless, itching for the chance to redeem myself after that botched topside run. But at the same time, my instincts were niggling at me to stick around. I kept seeing Don's horrified face, the broken way he looked at that ninja, like he was holding someone he loved rather than an enemy.

But that was crazy. He couldn't have known her. Sneaking off to flirt with Foot Clan babes was Leo's thing, right? Anyway, Don's a

recluse lately. He leaves the lair less than anyone. I was pretty sure one of us would have noticed.

Eventually Mike makes an appearance in the common room. He sprawls on the couch with a giant bag of Funyons and takes over the remote. I swing by Don's room without even really knowing what to say to him, just planning to wing it – but in the end, it doesn't matter. The door is locked and the soundproof light is on. I'm so sick of that fucking light. Never actually thought I would miss the sound of his computer games and buzzing power tools, but I do. The lair is too damned quiet lately.

I putter around by myself, scrounge up some food, punch the bag for a while, just killing time. I start to feel more and more stupid for sticking around. There's nothing for me here.

I start to think maybe a hot shower will help calm this agitation still rattling around inside me. Heat can have that effect on us; it relaxes us in a deeper way than humans can probably understand.

My plans change, or at least get put on hold, once I reach the upper landing. Don's heavy metal door is ajar and I can hear weird music coming from his room. The music only gets weirder the closer I get. It's got a hard electronic beat and some kinda vocals but I can't understand one word. I don't think it's a language I ever heard before. Also… I'm no expert, but it sounds kinda like a female backup singer might be having sex in the background and crying out in time to the music

I don't bother knocking, just push through the open door muttering, "Geez, Donnie. What kinda pornographic alien techno are you listening to…?" More of my awesome communication skills at work, see? I'm worried about my brother, so I barge into his room and immediately crack on his taste in music.

It doesn't matter, though. The room is empty.

I approach his main computer, the one making the bizarre music. There's a scrolling line of text near the top of the screen, and I squint at the words for a couple moments before it clicks. This program is translating the lyrics. It's boring, repetitious, hedonistic crap – which means it's pretty much like all techno music, even if the singer IS an alien. I lose interest immediately and drop my eyes to look at his desk instead. Don ain't the type to listen to music without doing something else. It's all just background noise for him.

I'm expecting to see the usual technology-related clutter, near-illegible blueprints, maybe the remnants of some project in progress. Instead… I see a dinner plate. A small pile of white powder. A razor blade. A post-it note rolled into a thin tube. Some yellow stuff, scraped off to the side.

My eyes are wide and blinking. I feel like I can't breathe even though my plastron is starting to heave. I don't want to believe it, but I know right away what I'm looking at.

Immediately I am racking my brain for valid reasons, trying to find a good excuse for what I'm seeing. Mike just got hurt, after all, so maybe it's left over from earlier? Maybe… but no! There's NO innocent reason for a post-it note to be rolled up like that.

I pinch the yellow stuff, roll it between my fingers. It feels waxy to the touch, and pretty much confirms what I'd been thinking. This is the time-release coating, scraped away so the stuff hits all at once. And it's the exact same color as those pills we fought over so many months ago.

OxyContin. This is so fucking serious. This is a million times more serious than him and Mike smoking weed together. I back away from his desk, feeling cold all over.

I'm furious at him. I'm fucking terrified for him. It's not a good combination. My mood has taken a sharp and deadly turn as I move into the shadow of one of his floor-to-ceiling server towers and wait for him to walk back through that door.

When Donatello comes back in, he immediately bumps the door shut behind him and hits a button on the wall beneath the light switch. The sound-proofing must be active now.

Good, I think. In the back of my mind I already understand that things are about to get ugly. I don't want interference from the others when the shit hits the fan. My father's heart is weak, and my desire to shield Mike from every ugly thing in life is so deeply ingrained that I barely need to think about it. We were gonna work this out right now, just him and me. We would sort this shit out tonight.

He's carrying a glass of water and a blue rubber bulb syringe. I watch him fill the bulb syringe and set the water down. Then he uses it to squirt water up one nostril, tilts his head way back, and closes his eyes. It takes me a second to figure out what he's even doing, but eventually I get it. We've got tiny, slitted nostrils – way smaller than a human's. They're also set low on our snout, so any stuff we inhale would have farther to travel. Never considered it before, but it must be hard for us to snort drugs without getting clogged up. I got no sympathy for this.

Don tosses the bulb syringe down and stands over his desk to mess with the powder. I've seen enough and step out of the shadows. The evidence I've seen is plenty damning. I'm not about to stand here and watch my brother poison his body with more of the stuff.

" *Un-fucking-believable," I growl, advancing on him with clenched fists.*

Donatello startles at the sound of my voice and fucks up the line he'd been chopping. Looks at me, then down at his desk, then at me again. One hand reaches out to tap his keyboard, some shortcut that stops his weird music. The silence is heavy now as he straightens up and slowly turns to face me.

" *Well…" he notes distantly, "that was careless of me."*

My brother sounds a lot less concerned about being caught than I'm expecting. Where is all the panicked sniveling I had prepared for? He was way more contrite about the weed.

With an awful lurch, I realize that he must be too high to care.

I didn't think I could get any more pissed off and disappointed, but that's exactly what happens. "Is that all you got to fucking say?" I snarl, getting up in his face and letting him see just how angry I am. But at the same time, it fucking hurts. It hurts deep in my chest, because he doesn't care.

It is way easier to embrace the rage than these hurt and heavy feelings.

" *Why?" he wonders slowly. His eyes are like two polished marbles, glassy and utterly blank. "You wanna talk about it? That would be new."*

" *Yeah, Don. Let's talk about how I fucking TRUSTED YOU!" I give him a hard shove, send him flying backwards.*

Don catches himself awkwardly on the edge of the desk. His mouth curls, almost smiling as he drags his gaze back up to meet my eyes. "Guess that was careless of you."

I grab him and look around, wanting to throw him again, harder, farther, preferably into something breakable. I can hear my breath coming in and out in angry huffs, and somehow I stop myself. When I release him, my hands are stiff and shaking with anger. But I make an effort to calm down some and study his face. I really do want to understand. "Who are *you? Is there something wrong with your legendary brain all of a sudden? This shit is so fucking dangerous. The news is calling it a god-damned epidemic! How the fuck could you..."*

Donatello doesn't answer. Instead he shakes his head and laughs. "Classic Raph… Sometimes I play this game where I see how many

sentences you can go without dropping the F-bomb. Right now your high score is two."

" *You think this is a joke?" I snarl. I am growing more desperate to wipe that lazy smile off his face. "Our whole family is counting on you. And you can't even fucking-" Great. Now this asshole actually has me paying attention to how often I say the word 'fuck'. "Just tell me why!"*

Don rubs at his snout and his knuckles come away wet. He looks at his hands for a moment before lifting his eyes and searching my face. In a soft and gentle voice that I haven't heard him use in ages, he says, "Because… fuck this. Fuck all this."

" *You… don't get… to say that," I inform him, bringing my face in close and enunciating every deadly word. "Leonardo would never say that. He would be the first to tell you that a* leader *doesn't have that luxury!"*

" *I'm not Leonardo," he deadpans. "I will never be Leonardo."*

" *No shit, Don. That's been pretty obvious to everyone since day one!" My lip curls in disgust as a new thought occurs to me. "Is THAT why you haven't put your foot down with Mike about the pot?" I narrow my eyes and lower my voice with disdain. "Does going there make you feel like too much of a hypocrite?"*

Don starts to shake his head, then stops and half shrugs. "Believe whatever you want."

The truth is, even though he apparently can't be bothered to defend himself, I'm not convinced about what I just said. Maybe it's wishful thinking on my part, but if he's been at this for any length of time, somebody woulda noticed. Right now he is thoughtless and more than a little fearless. I haven't got him to flinch yet - not once. Not even when I threw him against the desk. I know for a fact that I have never seen him act this way.

I almost wanna give up on him at this point. I want to end this whole conversation as completely POINTLESS, but something compels me to try one last time. I scowl and look away, debating with myself. It's the best guess I got – the ONLY rationale that doesn't make me wanna pummel him. It's the whole reason I wanted to check up on him in the first place.

Yeah, I'm just gonna say it. "Donnie... how much'a this is because of what happened with that girl today?"

At first he doesn't want to answer. No snarky reply, no careless shrug. Maybe that's telling in itself.

" *Don," I repeat sternly. I'm not letting this go without an answer.*

" *I wouldn't call it - unrelated," he says softly. He's no longer meeting my eyes but staring off across the room.*

I relax a little. That's what I need to hear – that this is a knee-jerk reaction to something awful, something specific. I don't even want to consider that he might be locking himself in here and getting fucked up all the time.

" *Look, Donnie…" I make a face. This is awkward. "Tonight, with the girl. It just… it* happens *. Probably less to you than any of us. But it's bound to happen sometimes, even to you!"*

He snorts softly. I'm definitely not getting through to him.

I rub my eyes briefly, all too aware of my missing bandana. I still haven't replaced it since handing mine over to Mike. "It's nothing to beat yourself up over, is all I'm sayin'. You were just tryin' to defend Mike. I get that. Anyway, she was comin' in fast from behind. There's probably nothing you coulda done differently..."

" *You sure about that...?" Donatello's reply is so absent and detached that it locks my teeth together. He meets my eyes dead-on,*

but there might as well be galaxies between us when he admits, "I was thinking I could've been sober."

" *You…" I can't fucking believe it. I can't believe he just said that. "You* worthless piece of shit! *" These ugly, snarled words are out of my mouth before I can filter them. I'm attacking him before I can stop myself.*

The first punch cracks his head back and to the side. His hand lifts reflexively to touch his mouth, then looks down in mild surprise at the sight of blood, just a small smear of it, but the contrast is bright against his olive green fingers.

When he looks back up at me, his bleeding mouth has curved in a wicked smirk. "There we go." His words are slightly slurred - whether from the punch in the mouth or the drugs, it's hard to say. "That's the sorta heartfelt talk I can always expect from you."

" *Oh, you wanna talk about this?!" I rage at him, seizing him fiercely in both hands. I am yelling in his face now, "You wanna talk about how you betrayed my trust, betrayed our whole team? And all the innocents up there, the people in this town who're up there getting robbed and stabbed and shot and fucking raped by our enemies. But you - you don't give a FUCK about them lately! You are a fucking danger to them and to ALL OF US if you think it's okay to patrol the streets or even go to the surface when you're high!"*

" *Y'know I didn' wanna go!" Don mumbles, looking sharply aside. "N'obviously I wazzn'... doped up like now, I was jus—"*

" *Wrong answer!" I holler, cutting him short. I pin him with one hand and slug him hard with the other.*

He reels and stumbles backwards, but doesn't so much as lift a shielding hand when I come at him again. I pull the next punch right before it lands and threaten him in a savage voice, "Better defend yourself, Donnie! We both know you deserve it this time."

I broadcast this next kick about a week in advance. Not only that, but I pretty much verbally warned him it was coming. He had forever to duck, to dodge, to deflect me or shove me off balance or SOMETHING! But he just… soaks it.

This is why fighting with Don is never any fun. I hate it. I fucking HATE when he does this! Because I wanna fight him. I deserve to fight him, maybe now more than I ever have before! He did *kill that ninja girl. And his recklessness, his* idiocy, *put all of us in serious danger!*

I grip his plastron hard and yank him away from the desk. My eyes are deadly on him now, I know. "Did you know… Master Splinter and I, we got an understanding. It is actually my role on this team to take the leader to task when he is being a total fuck-up *and putting the team in danger!"*

Donatello's eyes flicker with – something. I don't smell fear on him, like I normally can with the people I'm fighting. But I've got his attention.

" *So, y'see... I don't really* give a shit *if you defend yourself. Fighting with you this time is actually," I shove him away from me fiercely and deliver a turn-kick to his bridge, "my fucking* duty! *"*

The blow lands right where I want it to, gets him right in the lung. It's a take-down that only works on ninja turtles, one that our enemies must never find out about. We are trained to defend our bridges carefully when we fight, but of course Don is determined to ignore all that training. \ So he gets kicked to the floor with the wind knocked right out of him, and ends up on his shell, clutching his throat and gasping for air.

I'm on him then. There is no technique whatsoever in the way that I ground and pound him. I trap him between my legs and my fists go to town, smacking dully off bone and flesh. I'm not trying to do permanent damage, but I blacken both his eyes, get his mouth swollen and bleeding. I'm leaving my mark, really letting him have it.

But none of it matters. My fist freezes as I realize that he's started laughing.

" Dumbass..." he wheezes. "Go ahead... gimme your worst!" His shoulders heave, even though his eyes are swollen and streaming with tears. "Like I can even feel it."

" Wrong. Fucking. Answer," I mutter, deadly low. I'm so pissed off that he could laugh after all that, his words don't even fully register. I just want to hurt him. In my fury, I bring my fists down hard on his chest, but he's not some squishy human. I have a better chance of injuring my hands than his chest plates with this stupid move.

Of course he only laughs harder.

I realize then just how pointless this is. Just to prove it once and for all, I leap to my feet and pull the dirtiest trick in the book. This move has been off-limits by unspoken agreement since we were ten years old.

I lift my heel and bring it down hard, right on his fucking tail.

Don gasps and then sort of giggles, "Okay, wow! Yeah… Might've felt that a little."

A little? Fucking hell! He should be howling in pain from a blow like that. I realize then that my usual methods of punishment are not going to cut it.

I haul him up off the ground using both hands. Deceptively heavy as my brothers and I are, it's easy to do this now that my vision has tunneled and my veins are pounding with adrenaline.

I step back and execute a cheap but effective throw as soon as I've got enough clearance to pull it off. I send him flying shell-first, away from me and into the first of several servers and network switches which are mounted on a lazy combination of salvaged metal racks

and homemade wooden shelving. I watch as he lands with a terrible crash that reduces working technology to wreckage.

" *You feelin' it yet? I bet those big metal boxes and blinky lights are feeling it." I crouch down and cock my head at him conversationally. "What'd we break just now? Think it mighta been important?"*

" *Eh… Wi-fi?" Donatello is breathing hard now, carefully picking himself from the ruined racks and equipment.. His glassy dead eyes slide over two crushed drives on a server, take in darkened switches and status lights among mangled racks and splintered wood. "Voice over IP landlines, not that use them much these days. Most of the lair's intercom system."*

" *Yeah? And that doesn't bother you at all? Doesn't harsh your buzz?"*

" *Smash whatever you want, Raph," Don sighed. "I'll have it all back up and running by tomorrow."*

" *Are you seriously asking for MORE of this?" I growl, grabbing him with both hands again and tossing him into the next rack.*

Another terrible crash, and an even uglier landing. I stalk closer and glare down at him.

" *Well…" Donatello eventually groans, extracting the sharp edge of some twisted, jutting metal from his shoulder, blood welling up in the wound. "Anti-virus is fucked. But not the firewalls, those're redundant. There's an off-site mirror or… or some shit, no! Raph, that's* enough *, you've-"*

" *You are the dumbest genius I ever met, I swear to God," I snarl, seizing him again and slugging him in the face a couple more times, his head snapping back violently. When he's down, I haul him up and hiss, "At least protect your head this time!"*

He has the sense to do like I suggest, getting his hands up and laced behind his head just in time to brace his skull for the next collision with a server rack.

The rack topples beneath our weight. I grab him by the shoulders and this time I use his shell like a fucking battering ram, driving it repeatedly down on all three stacks of hard drives until they are crunched and spilling with mangled arms and platters. I may not know much about how to fix computers or build them from scratch, but I sure as hell know how to effectively destroy them. With enemies like Bishop and Baxter Stockman, I've had to learn that much.

I heft him up, stagger back several weary steps, scoping out my next target for potential destruction. This one is heavy duty, housed in glass. The toss from here to there seems like an enormous gulf, but… Fuck it. If he tests me, I swear I will find the strength somehow. I look at him. His eyes had followed mine to the glass server case, but now they snap back to meet mine. For half a second, he almost looks sober. He's feeling something, finally – even if it is shock and horror. What I've done to him is finally starting to have an impact.

His wide, dazed eyes struggle to fix on mine, and his hands touch the side of my face with clumsy emphasis. "Please. Please stop, Raphie," he begs me quietly. "Please don't do this."

God. He hasn't called me that in so many years. It makes him sound so young.

It makes me feel *young.*

" *Punish me if that will make it better somehow," Donnie gasps for breath, bracing his hands on my shoulders now. "But please don't. Please don't punish our whole family."*

" *Fine," I intone, deadly soft. "Then what do you think I need to hear from you right now?"*

" *I'm sorry!" he offers, looking and sounding stone sober. But he hands me this apology too earnestly. Too… automatically. Suddenly I am enraged all over again. I am looking at his shoulder which is torn open and just pouring blood, and he doesn't even notice!*

" *LIAR!" I howl at him in a voice that I barely recognize. "You don't feel shit!"*

" *M'not lying. Not really." Donatello's face pinches slightly. That's the only reaction I get for all of my berserker rage. He doesn't raise his voice at all when he says, "Tomorrow, I assure you. I will be so sorry… about all of this."*

" *Then I guess sorry's a start," I growl. "But what do I NEED to hear from you right now? What promise am I waiting for?" I bear my teeth in his face and spit each word with furious emphasis. "What. Actions. Do. I. Need. You. To. Take."*

" *Never again. I, I'll never – I won't take OxyContin. Recreationally. No, wait, how'zis? I won't take any opiates* ever *. Unless authorized by you, for medical reasons. From now on." His glassy grey-brown eyes are solemn and unsmiling.*

I'm still panting as I study his face, thinking it over. I set him down with a grunt. "You ready to promise all of that?"

" *Yes. Absolutely," Donatello agrees with an untroubled willingness that sets my heart back on a calmer rhythm. "I'll swear by the Great Turtle, or the soul of Hamato Yoshi, or whatever you want."*

" *Swear it on three more of them towers," I threaten.*

Donatello's tongue darts to wet his mouth and he nods. "I promise, Raph. I swear."

" *And if there is a next time, Donnie - I will be more thorough. I won't start with shit like wi-fi. Do you hear me?"*

" *Loud and clear," Already my brother's eyelids have grown heavy. The narcotics are sweeping back over what little semblance of sobriety he had been able to muster for the sake of that exchange. "I promise," he says slowly. "It won't be an issue."*

" *And what action do I need you to take right now?" I remind him.*

" *Now as in…* right *now?" Don sighs. "Can't whatever it is wait until I'm… less worthless?"*

" *Not a chance. Where's the rest, Don?"*

" *Oh," my brother's posture slumps with relief. "Is that all? Yes. I'll hand it all over to you. Every remaining pill."*

" *All the drugs," I clarify with a scowl, not trusting his specific phrasing. "I don't give a shit whether or not it's in pill form."*

Donatello doesn't look offended. He actually smirks and meets my eyes briefly, like I have proven myself unexpectedly clever. "I'll be thorough. You can dispense it yourself or throw it away. Whatever you think is best. But, um. Please dispose of it responsibly *, if that's what you've got to do. Don't just, you know… dump it in the nearest reservoir."*

" *I'll keep that in mind," I deadpan. "Come on. Let's get you stitched up."*

" *Wait, just, lemme… sorry." He bows his head and holds one hand up.*

I wait expectantly, uneasily, while Donatello turns and pukes into the wreckage immediately behind him. I glance over his shoulder at the mess he made and wrinkle my nose.

My brother scrubs the back of his knuckles across his mouth and eventually laments, "That's gonna set back my estimated time of repair."

I snort quietly. "Y'think? Up and at 'em, doofus. We gotta stop that bleeding." I try to shoulder him into a more upright position with only partial success.

" *Oh, that," Don mumbled. "Needs stitches, m'pretty sure. Forgot about it..."*

" *No kidding. One thing at a time, yeah? Come on. One foot in front of the other…" The blood is still pounding in my temples, but the anger is gone now - sapped right out of me by the pathetic sight of him.*

I glance over my shoulder at the damage I have done to about a third of his server racks. There's no way he's getting all this fixed by tomorrow, I remember thinking. Somehow it still manages to surprise me, seeing the whole of my destruction, even though I remember every brutal throw.

Donatello hadn't wanted Raphael's help rebuilding the server room. He didn't get all of it back up and running by the next day... just the essentials. He turned over all the painkillers promptly and discreetly. It looked like most of the shipment was accounted for. In spite of all that had happened, Raph had believed him.

Maybe it was just easier to believe him. Maybe it was cowardly. I should'a kept better tabs on him after that. That's what Leo would have done.

Instead Raphael had been wrapped up in his own stupid shit. He kept going out night after night, placating his rage, nursing his own hurt and sense of abandonment.

He'd convinced himself that Don couldn't have been messing around with that stuff for very long, considering how messed up he'd been just from snorting a couple lines. He'd told himself that the situation had been handled. As time went by, the incident had slipped further from his mind.

I had wanted – needed – to believe that it was over, but... God! What if it's not? What if I dropped the ball?

What if –

With a terrible lurch of vertigo, Raphael snapped back to reality. He was falling. He felt his shell slam hard against a sand-paper surface. The angle was sharp – too sharp to keep from sliding. and his stomach bottomed out.

He had been running in preparation to make the leap from a water tower to the next rooftop, but something had gone wrong. A loose shingle sliding out from underfoot. Now he was on his shell, skidding unchecked towards a dangerous drop-off.

"RAPH!" his brother's voice rang out in alarm from somewhere nearby.

Raph flipped over and spread out instinctively for purchase, his fingers and toes digging in hard for a handhold. Panic seized him by the guts with razor teeth as he felt one foot swing out over open air. The red-masked ninja managed to halt his rapid descent right as Leonardo reached him.

His brother's eyes were dark with concern as he extended a hand. Raphael gripped it gratefully and allowed the other turtle to help pull him back up to safety.

"Thanks," Raph muttered dazedly once they were back on the peak of the water tower. "Holy shit." His heart was still pounding painfully and his hands were shaking.

Leo was studying his face. "You okay?" he persisted, only adding to the humiliation. He could see perfectly well that Raph had not been hurt physically.

"Yeah," Raphael blurted automatically, then covered his face with his hands and retracted, "No. Just – gimme a second." It was

humiliating. He should know every step of this route. He *did* know every step... but apparently being sleepy or drunk was less impairing than spinning his wheels about Don.

Leonardo frowned and glanced around. "We're awfully exposed here. Can you make it to the next rooftop?"

Raphael shot Leo a dark look. He launched himself down the sloping water tower and into the sky. He flipped once in the air and nailed the landing, but this display of extreme proficiency did nothing to soothe his wounded pride.

Leonardo leapt after him, landing casually. The pair moved away from the edge where they might be seen from below.

"Raph. I need your head in the game now that we're on the surface, okay?" Leo was lecturing him already. It was always worse when Raph knew that he deserved it. "We're almost there."

"Look, I'll be fine," Raph muttered. "Dunno what came over me."

"Well, I do," Leo's expression was serious, even as he quipped, "And it doesn't take a *mind reader.* You're freaking out about Donnie. We both are."

"Not for the same reasons," the red-masked turtle muttered, looking down and watching his scarred hands flex and un-flex.

"I don't think that matters," Leo countered. "It's probably all related. I bet we're attacking the same problem from two different sides."

That actually made a lot of sense to Raph. He looked over at Leo and gave a single, small nod.

"Now, listen. April's apartment is literally a minute and a half in that direction." Leonardo casually pointed as he said it. He'd always been a living compass compared to the rest of them. "So let's just *get*

there. We'll learn what we can, and then we'll get home and see what you can work out with Donnie. Okay?"

Raphael felt some of the world's terrible weight shifting off him. "Yeah, okay," was all he could manage in the way of a response, though he was really thinking: *I am so glad you're back.*

Best Laid Plans

The rain was pleasant from the vantage point of April's luxury condominium. The rhythmic drumming on the window panes made a peaceful counterpoint to her trashy private eye novel. She was between contracts and expecting absolutely no one, thus allowing herself a welcome break from the adult world.

Casey was off to Northampton for an impromptu fishing trip, supposedly. April had no idea whether or not it was a *truthful* reason - rather doubted it, actually. Tonight, she couldn't bring herself to care. Even if Casey wasn't able to admit how frequently he still felt compelled to indulge in solo vigilante street warrior crap, at least his methods were improving. He was taking his time lately, picking his targets more carefully and making plans in advance. Just last week she had been attempting to straighten up the garage and utility space that was primarily his domain, and came across a stash of papers that he probably had not meant for her to see. She wound up slumped over his workbench, pouring over hastily scrawled notes, ominous lists of names, a hand-drawn layout of a building with exits and security cameras marked, a supplies list. He was trying to take better care of himself, possibly even for *her* sake . It seemed like steps in the right direction.

Anyway, what good did it do either of them for her to linger in bitter suspicion? She would not allow herself to investigate his half-hearted excuses this time. Instead, she would focus on the unexpected benefit of having the whole house to herself for the next few days. Her business cell was powered off and the fridge was well-stocked. The plan was to stay in all day dressed in silly adult-sized onesie pajamas, reading and surfing the net. Maybe she would binge watch something on Netflix later. Dark chocolate would get involved at some point. Most importantly, nothing at all productive would be accomplished today.

That had been the plan. *But even my best laid plans* , April reflected as she spied two skulking, familiar-shaped visitors on her fire escape, *have a way of going haywire once ninja turtles get involved.* Shewaited for the polite rapping of thick green knuckles on her windowpane and was not disappointed

"Hey, April," Leo greeted as she approached. His voice came muffled and his face was distorted by the rain-streaked glass. "Sorry we didn't call ahead."

April's heart leapt and she found that she could not be even slightly upset at the sight of them. It all went back to the very reason she had jumped at the chance for a Central American contract, in spite of the risk - the reason she had spent several extra weeks on her own dime investigating small villages, chasing vague rumors of the Ghost of the Jungle. Yes, the reasons she had told Leo were true as well - the others needed him back, perhaps desperately! She truly believed that.

But she had also been afraid for her own reasons. She had been afraid that she was *losing* them.

Even now, she was nursing a secret fear that Leonardo's homecoming wouldn't matter, after all. Once the excitement of the Winters adventure subsided, April worried that her life would go back to the way it had been before: peaceful, profitable... and so very mundane.

More than anything else, she just plain *missed* them. But unless she initiated the contact herself and scheduled a get-together, the days without hearing from the turtles would stretch into weeks. April had let them go purposefully for a time, once she'd begun to feel resentment and hurt building like a slow cancer beneath her ribcage. She deliberately stopped calling them, as a masochistic sort of experiment. How awful it had been to watch the weeks without them stretch into months. They had been such lonely and unmagical months.

But this was fresh evidence that her expensive gambit had paid off. Here they were, unsolicited! *Two of them, anyway. I'll take it!* she thought fiercely as she muscled the stubborn window open and felt an honest, involuntary smile light her whole face. "Raph! Leo! Gosh, you're both soaking wet. Get in here, but stay off the sofa until I find you two a couple of towels."

She eyed them to make sure they were going to stay put. That's when it registered that both turtles were trying not to stare at her. April looked down at herself and sighed. "Okay. Yes. I am wearing a Yoda onesie." She held her hands up to either side in invitation, "Let's get the comments out now."

"They're… they're very charming," Leo's choked compliments were hasty and unconvincing.

Raphael merely widened his eyes and pressed his mouth together, like he knew better than to fall into that trap. He gave a thumbs up instead of speaking. In that moment, April thought the red-masked turtle wise beyond his years.

Donatello or Mikey would have gotten a kick out of them , April couldn't help thinking. She shot Leo a wry glance and went to fetch the towels.

She watched as the two turtles dried off in silence. Now that the brief distraction of her silly pajamas was behind them, it seemed to her that Raphael looked upset. But then, he usually did to some degree. And Leo… well, he seemed calm enough. But then, he usually did! *Argh, frustrating turtles. They would already be talking if something was wrong, wouldn't they?* April was fairly sure that Leonardo wouldn't have let her get a word in edgewise for something even semi-urgent. She looked again and decided that Leo's gaze was entirely too indirect and thoughtful for her comfort. She had seen him wear a look like this before, when he was preparing to say something important. It sent a creeping sensation down the back of her arms.

"I was just about to make some hot tea, if either of you would…" *Wait, Raphael doesn't ever want tea.* April had glanced away in her sudden discomfort, but now she looked back at them to amend quickly, "Or… I think Casey still has some beer in the fridge?"

"Maybe water?" the more taciturn brother counter-offered politely.

"I can do that! This new fridge filters the water, makes ice cubes, and everything. I assume tea will be fine with you, Leo?"

"Better than fine. Sounds amazing." His head ducked in an informal bow of gratitude.

"Coming right up! Well, make yourselves comfortable," April said, parting her hands graciously. "I'll be right back... Oh. You're not hungry, are you?"

"Actually, we just ate lunch at this sub place Raph's crazy about…"

She had half turned away but that comment brought her back around to face the turtles squarely. "You took Leo to That Sub Place?" She gave a sunny smile of approval, cheering, "Aww, Raph! I'm so proud of you."

That got Leo out of such-a-polite-guest-mode, at least temporarily. He turned to Raph and demanded, "So April knows about That Sub Place. Does *everybody* know?"

"Ahh," Raphael hedged, scratching the back of his neck. "Depends. I mean, when ya say *everybody* …"

"Ugh, nevermind. Your whole body language just answered the question for me," Leo griped, glancing away sharply to hide a grin he could not completely suppress.

There, everything is fine. All that worry for nothing ! April turned to get their drinks. That's honestly what she intended to do as she

stepped out of sight. But then, distantly behind her, she overheard Raphael mutter explosively, "What the hell was that?"

"I *did* think they were charming! Yoda from Star Wars. I got the reference right away, but was trying not to laugh. I thought it might be rude..."

"Not that! What're we having a tea party for, anyway? When she gets back in here, quit dicking around and ask her about Donnie! If I get too impatient, I just might hafta do it for ya."

She didn't mean to eavesdrop, but fell involuntarily still at those words. Icy panic ran down her spine and sluiced in her gut. *Donnie! Oh, God... Is that why they've come?*

"We're guests in her home, Raph. We don't have to be barbarians about this."

"I wasn't going to be a *barbarian* ," Raphael scoffed at the dramatic word. "I'd just rather get to the point. This ain't a social call..."

April stumbled a step backwards, then another, then turned and fled back into the kitchen to busy her shaking hands with the simple tasks of fetching ice water and starting tea. She filled an electric kettle and pressed a button, lamenting for the first time that she had replaced her old fashioned stovetop kettle. This new one would cause the water inside to boil much too quickly.

Relax , she counseled herself desperately. *You knew this was coming! A family as closely knit as theirs, they can't keep secrets from each other long term. It's - it's socially and biologically impossible!*

Butat the same time, she was racking her brain with the same unsolvable questions she had asked herself so many times before: *What do I say, though? How do I explain myself? How do I look any of them in the eye and admit what happened? How can I repeat the awful things he said?*

April caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the faces of modern stainless steel appliances and saw frizzy, unstraightened strawberry blonde hair escaping beneath stuffed yoda ears. She saw herself wringing her hands in dismay and pacing the tiled floor. *Enough* , she decided, and forced herself to think of nothing except taking long, slow breaths in and out, tried to picture each breath like energy being drawn from the world and then released with each exhale, using relaxation techniques Splinter had made her demonstrate each time they practiced together.

After several of these, April felt herself capable of filling a glass of ice water. *There. At least that's accomplished.* The container made an unfamiliar click as she set it down on the smooth countertop of her cramped but well-appointed kitchen. She was not yet accustomed to the everyday sounds of her new condo. Even the clack of the electric kettle, meant to announce the readiness of the boiling hot water within, sounded unfamiliar and loud to the point of rudeness.

April scowled at the traitorously convenient object and needed several more deep, centering breaths before she could find the courage to begin steeping Leonardo's tea.

As their fingers rhythmically slammed on the colorful keys, Don tried to keep up with Michelangelo. But his brother had many natural gifts, such as insanely good hand-eye coordination and an inner fount of motivation and energy that was apparently without limit.

In stark contrast, Donatello was tired. This weariness had settled over him swiftly. Now it clung to him like an unwanted blanket in summer, except he couldn't shake it off. It was, by now, a familiar sort of tired, and always came with a melancholy malaise that made his thoughts feel as heavy and clumsy as his limbs. Worst of all, every task became harder. Even playing Guitar Hero with Mikey, a pastime he should have *enjoyed* , felt like a monumental chore.

If I could somehow bottle that irrepressible essence which Mikey just takes for granted… Don hadn't any idea how to do such a thing.

Huh. Jonas might actually know... Then again, he doubted he would be able to keep up with the alien chemist's explanation - especially not in his current, crashed out state.

Furthermore, Donatello knew exactly what would restore him. By this point, he had given up trying to repress the thought.

He knew he and his brother had shared an important moment back in the kitchen. This was the two of them goofing off together, 'just like old times' - purposefully ignoring the fact that they'd just shared a fairly intense reconnection. This was supposed to be a playful moment, but an important one too. It was an unspoken reassurance that the two of them would be okay. Mikey was trying so hard. And it was finally happening. He was getting his best friend back. It was going better than he could have dreamed! Donatello didn't want to risk screwing that up just because he was so… well, screwed up.

Some truly evil part of his psyche outlined the truth with academic cheer: *Not to mention, suffering from some good, old-fashioned - and* certainly *well-deserved - psychological withdrawal! It's important to be accurate.*

Whatever. That was *his* problem to deal with, and completely unrelated to the present drama. Yes, it was entirely *for Mikey's sake and for the sake of their relationship* that Donatello was actively wracking his brain for a reasonable-sounding exit. It wouldn't take him very long. He could do a few bumps and be back downstairs in no time... It took his sluggish mind longer than it should have to realize that an obvious solution was resting squarely in his hands.

"Hey, you wanna switch to main guitar…?" Michelangelo suddenly offered. Having noticed the scoreboard, he was now glancing over at Don with politely veiled concern. "That's what you normally play, right?"

"What? No... I mean, *yeah* , but that shouldn't matter." And here it was: the perfect opportunity to escape. Mike was handing it to him on a silver platter. His mouth was too wet suddenly. Donatello

swallowed hard. "It's just… lately I've been practicing with this redesigned controller. These guitars that ship with the game, they aren't exactly what I would call ideal for three-fingered mutants with extra large hands, you know?"

Michelangelo's mouth dropped open in surprise before he readily agreed, "Dude, tell me about it! Waitwaitwait. Are you saying you invented a Guitar Hero controller that's actually designed for us? And you didn't tell me about this idea, like - the *very second* it popped into your genius brain!?"

Numbers on both sides of the scoreboard were plummeting now. Mikey had dropped his plastic guitar and was shaking Donnie's shoulder with enthusiasm.

"Uh. Well, it's just a proof of concept! It's not even guitar shaped just yet, but… yeah. It definitely works."

"Huh." That admission cooled some of the hyperactive brother's excitement. "I think it *has* to be guitar shaped. That's the whole idea, right? It's called Guitar Hero, not Joystick Hero."

"It's not a *joystick* ," he defended with a reluctant grin, all too aware that it was a fair assumption. Donatello had a nostalgia for classic joysticks which often presented itself in his designs. "I just haven't gotten around to making it... exactly, well.. guitar shaped yet."

"So what shape is it?" Mike wanted to know.

"The main part hangs from a cord around my neck and braces against the plastron." Don made crisp gestures with his hands to help convey the concept. "There's also sort of a wand for the left hand. For now I've got them connected with a wooden dowel."

"Necklace Hero, huh?" Michelangelo's face was dubious as he tried to picture it. "Or maybe Necklace-on-a-Stick Hero..."

"Okay, so it's a really crudeearlyprototype!" Don amended, feeling his pride beginning to stir somewhere beneath the murk of his ulterior desires. "But, still. It's kind of awesome. I can *destroy* that one Dragonforce song with it."

Mike clicked his tongue, unimpressed. "Even *Leo* beat that song."

"Yeah? Did he beat it on *Expert?* "

Mikey's eyes widened. "Fuck you. None of us can play on Expert!" Harsh words, but a huge grin was beginning to stretch from one round cheek to the other. "Screenshot or it didn't happen!"

"Oh. Well, that could be tricky." Don stalled, and for no better reason than to whip his less-than-patient brother into a proper state of console nerd frenzy. "As it happens, I *did* take a screenshot. Because it was a momentous victory, obviously! Unfortunately I was playing on an alien emulator at the time, and… well, I wasn't precisely *here* when it happened, if you follow. There's no connecting to the lair's cloud server from inside a pocket dimension, so I was only able save it locally..." Nonetheless, he took out his phone and stared at the screen as if he was now pondering a way to make the impossible happen.

"Dude, forget about the screenshot. Forget all of that." Mike stabbed one finger violently in the direction of Don's room. "Go NOW! Venture forth, to whatever crazy dimension you stashed this thing in. Bring it to me immediately, *Otōto* ! And if you think you can get away with leaving such an awesome prototype unfinished for too much longer, well... for once my brainy little brother is SADLY mistaken!"

"Ugh," Don's tone was good-natured, in spite of rolling his eyes and falling back into comfortable sarcasm. "That will take some getting used to."

"Yeah? I must already be used to it! Came out *super* natural, if you ask me."

"Your *face* is supernatural," the genius mocked under his breath, just to show Mike that he was taking his new role of little brother seriously.

"Ha!" Mike cackled and agreed, "Yeah, it totally is! Good one. Now… seriously. Go get the thingy."

At this, Donatello practically bounced up the stairs to the lair's second level, but his enthusiasm was entirely for Mikey's sake. The false cheer fell apart like so much wet toilet paper as soon as his self-proclaimed new big brother was out of sight.

Don's desire to get on with feeling better was pushing hard against his conscience now. Guilt had put him in the mood to drag his feet, yet they drove him forward at an urgent pace.

The main problem with relying on big brothers, Donatello reflected, *is that they are not always around. And even when they are there for you - even when they love and support you more than you probably deserve, it only makes them want very badly to trust you. Big brothers are unfortunately very easy to mislead.*

April was hyper-aware of their eyes tracking her as she took a cautious path around a sharp-edged coffee table. She kept her back very straight and her green eyes were trained on the tray of drinks in front of her, putting a lot of focus into keeping it steady. The creamy white carpets had been a horrible choice. She felt like she was walking onto a stage, or maybe into an interrogation room, and about to be blinded by the lights.

Somehow she managed to set the tray down without incident and remained outwardly calm as she took a seat. Leonardo took that as a cue and immediately leaned forward to fill the delicate clay cups. This tea set he now poured from was one of many artifacts they had uncovered and appropriated during her days living above the antique shop. She had hung onto it specifically because the leader in blue took such an obvious liking to it. The set was wholly incongruous

with her ultra-modern condominium, but that didn't matter to April. Leonardo's love for the piece had long since transferred to become her own. She would never replace it. Even now, his face lit with pleased recognition at the sight of it, and her pounding heart grew ever so slightly calmer.

They were still her friends, still her family. This didn't have to be as painful as she had imagined it. Sure, it would be hard to relive those moments, but maybe the turtles would forgive her. Maybe she could heal and move on from the traumatic night if she opened up enough to talk about it. Maybe it would help to heal the rift she had perceived to be growing between all of them.

She cleared her throat and wondered softly, "Why isn't Michelangelo here?"

"Mikey?" Leo blinked up at her from where he had just finished filling her cup. He gave her a curious half smile, then straightened to assure her, "He's still back at the lair. They're stuck doing this lesson, which Raph and I got excused from... it's complicated." He rolled his eyes, then lifted his tea cup to appreciate the aroma briefly before adding, "I can't help noticing you didn't ask why *Donnie* didn't come."

"Nope," April agreed, with a quiet emphasising pop at the end of the word. "Sure didn't."

Raphael and Leo exchanged a glance. Then they were both looking at her.

"I *know* why Donnie hides from me," she went on to explain. "And, of course, you had the excuse of being sent on some spiritual coming of age journey-" Her eyes had been steady on the elder turtle brother, but now her gaze fixed on Raph. "And *you* I get. You and Casey might as well be two troubled solo vigilante peas in a pod. But…" April looked down at her tightly folded hands and her face took on fresh creases as she quietly admitted, "I have NO idea what went wrong between me and Mikey."

Raphael and Leonardo exchanged another glance, and this time it was full of shared understanding. Leo looked back at her and spoke promptly, "I wouldn't take it personally. He's been... distracted lately. Apparently while I was gone, he took up some questionable hobbies and made interesting new friends."

"Interesting?" Raph muttered. "Guess that's one word for those scrappy little *thug wannabes* …"

"We're still trying to decide how we feel about them," Leonardo confessed with a forced smile.

"I ain't deciding!" Raph corrected. "Maybe you're still deciding, but I already told you exactly how I feel. Except for Angel, I don't like 'em!"

"We're, ah, having a lot of feelings about it. "They're taggers. Mike's decided that *he's* a tagger. Artistic vandalism is, apparently, super fun."

"That Pyro kid is a junkie and a confirmed piece of shit," Raph continued to mutter under his breath, speaking half to himself. "Ain't above breaking into local businesses when he's hard up for a fix. I've taken him down like six different times!"

Leonardo tilted his head and seemed to file away that information for future investigation. Rather than pursue it, he took a thoughtful sip from his teacup and eventually said, "For better or worse, Mike has already revealed himself to these humans. The whole thing came to a head last week. To my surprise, Mike was more than willing to submit to any expectations I might have regarding his use of marijuana - but he refused to give up these new friends. He was... adamant." The young *chunin* spun the teacup gently in his fingers and hitched one shoulder in a minimal shrug. "It was too good a bargain to pass up. I've agreed to give these kids a chance."

"Confirmed piece of shit," Raphael repeated slowly, pinching his fingers for emphasis.

Leo smiled tightly and insisted, "We're working through it. But honestly, April... it isn't concern for *Mikey* that brings us here today."

"You're here to talk about Donnie," she deduced softly.

"That's right," the young leader agreed gravely. "We're both extremely worried about him. We know something is wrong, but he hasn't been forthcoming. A moment ago, you said you knew why he hides from you - but Raph and I still have no idea what happened."

"Oh, that. Well…" April glanced down, unable to bear his gaze. So earnest and direct. Her eyes were suddenly hot with tears. "It's all my fault," she croaked. "I made a mistake, and it screwed up our friendship."

The two turtles were plainly astonished. She had no choice but to explain herself, even though her throat had constricted into a painful knot that made each word a struggle. "Casey…" She bared her teeth in a rictus of shame. Every word hurt. "I haven't. If I talk about this. You can't…"

"I won't speak of it," Leo promised gently. He glanced over at his brother. Raph was already starting to frown.

"I know, Raphael." April shook her head with genuine regret. "I know how close you two are. How *unfair* it is, for me to even-"

"I won't speak about it, either," Raphael abruptly declared, cutting her apology short. When everyone looked at him in surprise, the turtle gave a defensive shrug and said, "I'm serious! That's how freaked out we are." His amber eyes fixed on her intently. "Yeah. Whatever you need, sister. Casey's gonna hafta take care of himself."

April was speechless for several beats, struck mute by a strange blend of relief and terror. At last, she said, "You two have probably gathered that Casey and I went through a rough patch. We were working opposite shifts and hardly saw each other. And even when we did, we weren't seeing eye to eye on - well, a lot of things. At one

point, I seriously considered calling it quits." She sipped her tea and set it back down without tasting it, more to stall for courage than anything. "What I don't think anyone realizes is that… for a time, anyway... I thought I might leave him for *Donnie* ."

She could see the impact of her words hit both of their faces. Neither had been prepared for that. "He was coming over to visit a couple times a week, keeping me company. He would bring projects to work on sometimes, or he'd help me with - well, literally anything I needed. This turn my career has taken - so much of what I do is solitary now. Aside from meeting and delivering to the clients, I spend a lot of my time surrounded by strangers or completely alone. And it's sporadic. There can be long stretches between contracts. I'd been going half crazy with loneliness. I was just so grateful to have someone around, someone courteous and caring, someone who appreciated me, who *noticed* me. And Donnie *always* used to notice. I wouldn't have to tell him that I'd had a bad day. He would just... know. He knew it as soon as he saw my face."

April faltered, startled by the wistful tone her voice had taken. She was back with Casey, after all. She was committed to him. But having heard herself say those words, and the way she had said them, it became harder to kid herself. She *missed* him. She missed the Donatello she had come to know, the new intimacy and connection that had seemed to grow between them. It had seemed to get stronger every day - right up until it imploded, right before her eyes.

"We got so close, so quickly," she said, lowering her lashes and dropping her voice to a hush. "I don't know exactly when I started to… to *think* of him that way. I mean… I've always mothered the four of you, to some extent." She sniffed and waved a hand at Raph. "Big Sistered. Whatever! It sort of... snuck up on me."

The brothers shared a quick wordless glance that was hard to interpret. Leonardo was the first to look back at her. "So... you and Donnie. You two have actually…" The leader's veneer of calm cracked as he struggled to find the appropriate words. By the look on

his face, he did not seem to enjoy whatever mental imagery he was picturing.

Raph seemed to have an easier time with the news. "Son of a bitch," he muttered under his breath. "Mikey was right all along."

"He would still owe me forty-five bucks," Leo couldn't help correcting. "Jhanna was the first. Don himself confirmed it."

April eyed the pair but found herself unable to summon any feminist outrage over the fact that they had apparently taken bets about her sex life. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that the turtles were teenagers, but this was *not* one of those times.

"Jhanna was the first," she agreed. A *completely irrational* flare of jealousy pitched her voice hollow and flat. "She will *always* be first. *Renet* came second...even if Don 'cannot confirm nor deny it.' But I was not the third. No…" Her throat closed up involuntarily. April felt tears begin a burning trail down the inner curve of her cheek. "I wasn't anything."

Both of the turtles gave an audible exhale of relief. It was plainly obvious that neither had expected to hear what she had to say. Apparently it was welcome news.

"So what *did* happen between you two?" Raphael demanded, too impatient to wait for his sibling to formulate a more tactful inquiry.

"Isn't it obvious by now?" April croaked. She leaned forward to partially cover her face with both hands. "I finally found the courage! To tell him - no, to *show* him how I felt. I spent the whole night fumbling for words. Saying too much, but at the same time, hardly anything. Everything was coming out wrong. Finally, I just… I pulled him closer and kissed him. But he stopped me right away."

"He did what?" Leo blinked at her in sheer disbelief.

"He stopped me! I don't know why I'd been so sure that he… I always thought he might have feelings for me. I'd thought so for a while. For a split second I was convinced that he would kiss me back. But… he didn't. I was wrong. He stopped me right away. And then… well." April's salt-stung eyes drilled into the floor. Her rough voice fell to just above a whisper. "He turned me down."

April glanced up to see that both turtles were thrown by this conclusion. At the time, she had been every bit as baffled.

"That makes no sense." Leo frowned and glanced at his brother for confirmation before looking back to assure her, "Donatello *adores* you, April. He's had a crush on you for - probably as long as we've known you! It's been completely obvious to the rest of us for ages."

He looked to Raphael for support and got none, just a blank stare. Leonardo made an impatient sound in the back of his throat, startling Raph into the realization that actual words were expected of him. His eyes widened and he blurted, "For real. Don's had a huge boner for ya, from day one."

Leonardo gave his brother an exasperated look.

"What?" Raph griped. "That's what a crush is. Having a huge boner for somebody. We pretty much said the same thing!"

Any further reproach from Leo was cut short by April. She clenched both fists and snapped, "Well, guess what? Both of you were *wrong* . And, so was I. He had ALL of us fooled."

"Did Donnie actually…" Leonardo's brow creased and he trailed off. A beat later, he seemed to scrap whatever he'd been trying to ask and started over. "When he turned you down, did he give any specific reason?"

"Oh, yes," April confirmed, clipped with bitterness. "Reasons. There were several. Apparently he doesn't think of me that way and never has. Apologized for anything he might have done to give me the

wrong impression. He said I was very special - Casey too. He said he had come to view both of us as family. Close family. Much too close for him to be comfortable with any… I think the phrase he used was 'romantic entanglement'?"

"Bullshit," Raphael rejected her words, soft but adamant. "The rest of us, sure. But not him." His hands cut the air in a minimal gesture. "No fuckin' way."

Leo glanced at Raph as if he was inclined to agree, but kept those thoughts to himself. Instead he narrowed his eyes in thought before asking, "Did he mention any other reasons?"

"Yes," April admitted, feeling her face grow hot with fresh shame. "He pointed out that… ah, his eighteenth birthday. It was still a couple months away. He said that even if he did desire me, he wouldn't…" April was rapidly losing all semblance of dignity. Her face twisted with a fresh threat of ugly and involuntary tears."He wouldn't act on it. Because, the age difference."

She was gasping the painful words, having to force them out. "He said. It wouldn't be, ah... *appropriate..* ."

The turtles exchanged another glance, sharper this time. "That ain't right," Raph announced, giving his head a slow shake. "That ain't somethin' Don would give a single shit about."

"It never kept him from pining before," Leo agreed.

April stiffened where she sat and asked in fiercer voice, "Why would I *make up* something like that?"

"Nah, nah!" Raph lifted a hand to forestall this. "Wasn't sayin' *you* were lying! It's just, maybe HE was."

"Why? If he cares so much, why on Earth would he say something like that?" April had directed her question at Raph, but it was Leo who answered.

"It's not the gentlest way he might have chosen to decline, but... I can't say I completely disapprove of his decision to do so. I'm so sorry that he hurt you in the process, April. He was probably just flustered."

"Sounds ta me like he couldn't find it in himself ta put the moves on somebody else's girl," Raphael reflected in a slow voice, still needing to work through his thoughts and feelings surrounding Donatello in order to process the truth. "He couldn't do that. Not ta Casey, y'know? Knew it wouldn't be right. So he did the decent thing: he stepped down."

"I can only imagine how hard it must have been," Leonardo agreed thoughtfully, "or how much it must have hurt. So he went overboard, maybe. Lashed out at you, just to make sure you wouldn't pursue it. Then... probably doubting his resolve, as well as his acting abilities... he began to keep his distance. I think Raph's right. It's the only explanation that makes sense."

April looked from Leo to Raph, surprised by the younger turtle's emphatic nod. One of his big hands closed over one of his older brother's shoulders in an unprecedented display of unity as his head bobbed in steady agreement. When Raphael's gaze knifed back to April, he inclined his head in an uncommon display of respect. "Ape... listen. I just wanted to say, I'm real sorry you got hurt by this. And especially that none of us even… we had no idea!"

"Well, I wasn't exactly knocking on doors and passing out flyers to spread the news," she mumbled wryly, risking a brief glance at him before dropping her gaze quickly.

Sometimes Raphael was like this. He might seem a million miles away from what everyone else was saying, and then-completely without warning-his focus would settle on a person squarely and entirely. Once he was fixed on you, it was impossible to notice anything else. Commanding the whole of his burning, undivided attention was intense and sometimes even daunting. "I just want you

to know… whatever load of crap that nerd came up with to say to you? Forget it."

His golden eyes seemed to wrench her downcast gaze up out of her lap with some invisible force. She found herself looking up at him, staring helplessly "I bet you five-thousand dollars he's been been kicking himself ever since that day. Knowing he fucked up completely, said the worst possible thing he could say. And this is weird, but… for once, I might actually know exactly how he feels. Shutting people out when ya can't handle what's going on with 'em? Lashing out when you don't need to? Way more than ya meant to? Yeah. I been there before, bigtime.

"Whenever I get like that, I can't ever seem ta just back up and fix it. All these times I get so worked up, and I'm hollering, and then I gotta storm off all of a sudden? I ain't leavin' cuz I suddenly hate your face! Probably just occurred to me that I was too depressed and overwhelmed to function, and the kindest thing would be ta get away from all people. And what are people supposed to think? To them it looks to like I must not give a shit about anyone. When really, I am way more likely to explode and say the worst possible thing because I care *too much.* Cause they got me feelin' *way too much* , all at once. I get *all that.* Enough that I know what it looks like."

These intense confessions were unexpected. April already felt foolish for having braced for something more frightening, only to be moved and enlightened by his brutally honest words. "I know, Raph. Maybe you never said so before, point blank, but… you didn't *need* to. I figured out most of that with nothing but long-term observation.

"But that's you. Don didn't *explode* at me, Raph. Not once! He was rattled by what happened, definitely. But he kept his cool the whole time, spoke rationally." April didn't voice her next thought: that getting some kind of explosion out of him may have been preferable.

"Rational my ass," Raph countered adamantly. "Let's rethink that from his point of view. Pretend you're this nerd who don't get out of the house much. I mean, such a huge nerd that even if you

WEREN'T stuck in the body of a mutant freak monster and totally outcast from society… you probably still wouldn't get out of the house much.

For as long as you can remember, you been taught to hide from women. Respect em, protect 'em. But nobody break stealth, for fuck's sake, because they *always* start to scream. Might even piss themself. We were all taught to expect it.

You wanna stick to the shadows of that pretty girl's bedroom and watch her take all her clothes off? Well, there's no clan law to stop you. You stayed undetected, that's the important thing. Sooo.. Whatev, right? Be a scary fucking creeper. Get your lurk on."

April felt her stomach curl and couldn't help the way her face twisted in reaction. "That's…that's horrible." She dragged her eyes off Raph to look at Leo for confirmation.

He'd been giving Raph free reign to speak, but now Leo's face had darkened. "Master Splinter never taught us that."

"No kiddin'! We could fill a book with the shit he never taught us," Raph shot back.

"He never would have condoned *that!"* Leo insisted, growing hot with distaste.

"Never stopped us, either." Raph's voice had gone flat, but some of the fire returned to him as he went on. "Now, actually *talking* to a woman? Just me and some broad, having a normal fucking conversation? A little getting to know you, nobody's basic rights get violated, act like a decent fucking person for a second, maybe I wanna give *that* shit a whirl? Fuck, no. I mean, wow, is that frowned on. Unless I was given specific orders to gather intel or I'm actively saving her life, Dad's gonna be pissed. Probably the whole team will get punished along with me, and everybody's gonna know why."

"Wait, wait. Before we move on, I just - that was Don you were talking about?" April crunched her face at Raph in helpless disbelief. "I'm just trying to keep all this new information straight. Mister Smooth Conversations refers to you, and you think Don is some kind of Peeping Tom stalker?"

"Nope. Not anymore. Not for a while now." Raph cocked his head at April. "When you came into our lives, it turned his whole attitude around - for the better, if ya ask me. Once he told me that knowing you made him wanna be a gentleman and a feminist at the same time."

April didn't know what to say to that. If she had inspired such profound change in Don's attitude towards women, maybe there was something to what Raph and Leo were saying. It was hard to imagine though, when she had been haunted for so long by her memories of that night. His conflicted look of disgust, quickly followed by a hasty attempt to cover it with extreme politeness, his obvious ongoing embarrassment… if these reactions had been faked, Don had done a very fine job of it.

"Well… there, you see?" she finally said, picking her crestfallen head up with effort. "You both seem to know more than I do about what's going on with him. I don't know how much help I can be in your quest for answers. He can't seem to stand being in the same room with me."

"Raph said he noticed the same thing."

"I can't just go up and ask him how to fix us. We just don't *talk* like we used to. It's like we've become strangers."

"That's exactly how I feel about 'im," Raph confessed heavily. "I dunno how to fix it either, but... I'm still gonna try."

April brushed at her eyes. "You have a plan already? Because I don't."

Raph's broad teeth flashed at her, more grimace than smile. "Sorta. Work in progress."

"Well, April, you're in luck.I'm good with plans," Leo volunteered. "Or so I've been told." He managed to hold his teacup gracefully in spite of his oversized hands. Peering into the beverage as if divining answers from it, he ventured slowly, "What if we put the you in a situation where the two of you *have* to interact? But in a safe way." He flashed Raphael a smile that was preemptively apologetic as he elaborated, "In an *educational* setting."

"What?" Raphael had just reached for his ice water, but at that word everything seemed to register at once: Leo's weird smile, his word choice, his *meaning…* He widened his eyes at his brother and set his glass down with a sharp clack. "No. No, Leo! Tell me you don't mean..."

"I do." Leo shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry. I can't *believe* that I do, but… for the good of the family. Yes."

"Argh!" Raphael dug his fingers hard into his face. "That has gotta be the craziest plan I ever… We just escaped! We spent the whole fucking morning bein' traumatized and lookin' for a way out, but we finally escaped! We'd done it. Now you wanna march back in there… and say *what?* Wechanged our *minds?"*

"We'll say… whatever it takes. Maybe that April is better suited to teach this subject than anyone who has tried so far. Is that so hard to believe? She has the decorum and the experience."

"Wait. What is this about?" By this point, April had been properly baffled out of her sadness.

"You're not going to believe me when I tell you," Leo sighed. "Well, Raph? What do you say?" He gave his brother a searching look and pleaded, "For Donnie's sake?"

"Rrrgh…" Raph positively glared at Leonardo. Finally he managed, covering his eyes again and speaking through gritted teeth, "Unified front."

Panic Room

I tremble

T hey're going to eat me alive

If I stumble

Th ey're going to eat me alive

Can't you hear my heart

Beating like a hammer

Beating like a hammer

Help, I'm alive

My heart keeps beating like hammer

Hard to be soft

Tough to be tender

Come take my pulse,

The pace is on a runaway train

Can't you hear my heart

Beating like a hammer

Beating like a hammer

- Metric, "Help, I'm Alive"

Chapter 27 : Panic Room

It wouldn't open.

Donatello pulled his hand away from the back wall and stared at it, stunned. Fear began trickling through his guts and pooled in his bowels like icy water. He forced his other hand open, the one clenched around the tiny pendant, and looked at it again. The minute and second hands remained frozen in the same position as before, a less-than sign that declared the time precisely four-oh-two.

His panic room would not open.

His panic room would not open!

When he had been informed of his terminated apprenticeship, Donatello had grieved at the lost opportunity for higher education, not to mention the effortless means of transportation to distant places and alternate universes. Always these had been Nulltime's greatest lures. Being denied access to the Federation club scene and the crazy intergalactic social life he had enjoyed while living with Renet... well, Donatello had already mentally prepared himself to let all of that go. Naturally there would be times when he would miss the excitement, the crystals, the music, and the women – oh man, *especially* the women. But there was also a surprising sense of relief in having it all snatched away from him. Maybe now his life could slow down to a more reasonable pace. It would be good for him, he was sure of it.

Yes, he had reasoned himself into a state of near optimism over being fired. But now… anything but *this!*

*Trapped! I am **trapped** in real time!*

"Nononono. Don't do this to me," Donatello pleaded under his breath. Then he lifted his head and pitched his voice louder as it occurred to him that he was very likely being monitored. "Please! Please don't do this. *It isn't fair!* My panic room isn't even a part of Nullspace. Your rules should not apply to it!"

Time didn't stand still in his pocket dimension – it just moved *very* slowly, at a rate of about an hour and a half per real-time second. He looped the pendant around his neck and placed both hands flat on the wall. It remained solid. Blank, immovable concrete stared back at him.

Don slapped both hands against the wall hard enough to make his palms sting.

His panic room would not fucking open!

"Rrraaagh!" He pushed against the wall with all of his might, but it was no good. Donatello whirled around and put his shell to the wall, splaying his hands on it. His gaze darted around the empty room. His normal, mundane, real-time room. Suddenly it seemed so small.

"Please be reasonable," he begged the empty room in a strained voice, fighting hard to keep calm. He was still a person of interest, wasn't he? Surely someone, somewhere, was listening! "You can't expect me to – to keep it together indefinitely! Where am I supposed to go, when I'm..." *Unstable. Enraged. Coming down. Falling apart.* "When it – when it gets to be too much? You can't expect me to act like nothing's wrong for the rest of my life!"

He wasn't talking to Renet anymore. She may be hurt, she may be furious, but she would *never* do this to him. For all of her carelessness, there had always been good intentions for him at her core. She fought so hard to ensure his survival!

Donatello understood now that what Jonas implied earlier must be true after all: Renet really must be gone. She had been transferred to another layer, or perhaps banished from Nulltime all-together. There would be no apology, then - no chance to say goodbye. Despair punched him in the throat as he realized that he must be to blame for whatever had befallen her. She was gone, maybe forever! Of course Jonas would have followed her. But who was left? Simultaneous, who despised him? No… he would have followed her, too. The guy was a meddlesome tyrant and an asshole of the highest order, but

Don couldn't fault his devotion to his protégé. "Whoever you are… whoever's taken control of this layer, please have mercy! I'm begging you!"

His gaze flicked desperately from one end of his tiny room to the other, hoping for some flash of light, an answering voice, some sign of reassurance from the Nulltime authorities. Except for his shallow, panicked breathing and the whirring fans of servers and PC towers, all was silent and still.

"You've killed me," he realized softly. The fear in his gut had solidified into a sharp-edged block of ice. "I will be Undone for sure now. It's only a matter of time…" *Whoever took her place doesn't even know me. They must not care about my life at all.* "But that's *always* been the simplest solution for you people, hasn't it? The Unweavers Guild has been arguing for it since day one!" He could hear the hysteria creeping into his voice, but it didn't matter. The sound-proof light was on. And ultimately, none of it mattered. He was done for.

"How will you do it? Is there already a plan? Will only three baby turtles fall down the storm drain? I'll be caught by the little boy, spend my life as someone's witless pet? Maybe my egg never hatched in the first place. Still-born? Never even fertilized? That ought to wrap things up neatly, solve this whole mess you've inherited!"

Donatello clenched his fists, clenched his teeth, his fury rising like an unstoppable tide. His wild gaze challenged the empty room, since Time Lord Whoever-He-Was didn't have the decency to appear or even answer. "WELL, FUCK YOU!" He snagged the nearest available, heavy looking tool off the desk and ferociously attacked the wall. The angle grinder was better suited for cutting through mortar and tile. It might have been able to handle solid concrete for a short time before overheating, but only with a more sensible approach which involved plugging it in and turning it on.

Chips concrete flew at the onslaught. He struck the heavy circular blade against the wall again and again, knowing he was damaging a perfectly good tool with every swing. Donatello didn't care. None of it

mattered. "FUCK," slam, "EVERY," slam, "LAST," slam, "ONE OF YOU!" Slam, slam, slam, slam!

Panting, shoulders heaving, Donatello sucked a breath through his teeth and beheld his psychotic handiwork. The angle grinder was too bent and misshapen to spin the blade now, rendered worthless. He'd taken only a small chunk from the wall – a mere scuff, by comparison.

A pointless, stupid waste. He let the ruined tool fall to the floor.

"Bastards," he gasped, his vision warping with angry, unshed tears. "Your whole council can go to Hell. You snatch me from the death that I chose. You put me on lock-down. You "fix" my life by ripping out the *very best part* of it! You tell me what to do, what to say, what not to say. You *constantly* watch me. Your hand is ready on that god-damned alarm, just waiting for me to blow it! And in spite of everything, in spite of ALL THAT… it gets better! I get better. I start to see past my sadness. I start seeing reasons to stay, and I… *I want to live!* I want to live, do you hear me? And how fucking cruel is that? You wait until I finally want to live. That's when you kill me!"

"Nobody's trying to *kill you* ," a familiar voice drawled, ultra-casual. "Fucking drama queen."

"Jonas?" Donatello whispered in amazement. His head whipped toward the voice. Sure enough, the Omatran was draped in one of his office chairs. In a cringing, far more embarrassed voice, the turtle mopped sweat from his brow and mumbled, "Uh. Hey."

"Hello, Hamato! Tell us how you really feel, why don't you?" Jonas tilted his head, causing his black spikes to flop to one side like an unruly dandelion. "Got all that tweaker rage out of your system?"

"Doubtful," Don muttered bitterly, glancing down and away. When he looked back at Jonas, his eyes were calculating. "It's good you're here, though. I really need your help."

"That's what I'm here for," Jonas said agreeably, parting his hands.

"Great. Well, somebody's cut off access to my back room. I can't get the door open. That room was a gift from Renet. It's not a part of Nulltime. It's none of their business, quite frankly, so I don't think they have any right to just—"

Jonas had been regarding him with a heavy-lidded gaze, but now he lifted a hand and interrupted with emphasis, "They have *magic that shapes reality* , Hamato. So long as the council agrees that it's for the good of the spiral and enough Lords sign off on it, they'll do whatever the fuck they want,"

Donatello stared at the Omatran in open-mouthed dismay.

" *Magic* is the only way that door is getting opened. And I'm a tech-head like you, so… much as I'd love to help, you're asking the wrong guy. Also? Pretty sure the new boss would shit-can me. Right?"

The turtle gave a startled cry as every monitor and display screen in his electronics-cluttered room lit up with random sentiments of agreement.

OMFG SO FIRED

GONNA GO WITH…

YES YES YES YES

YES YES YES YES

YES YES YES YE S

Without question !

U CAN BET

UR SWEET

BLUE ASS,

SON!

"There. You see?" Jonas shrugged. He fluttered a slender hand at all the snarky messages, nonplussed by them.

"The new boss," Donatello murmured slowly, eyes wide. "The new boss who apparently just *hijacked* every networked device in my room?" He snapped out of his brief daze and scrambled to sit at the nearest workstation.

"Are you telling me your *alarm clock* is networked?"

"It syncs to my calendar," Don admitted sheepishly over one shoulder. His fingers were already flying on the oversized keys, pulling up reports from the lair's various security logs. "I can control it through a modded exchange server."

"Sounds very sexy," Jonas beamed at him. "Tell me again how it is you got women before you met me?"

"Internet download, mostly?" Donatello quipped blandly without looking away from his monitors. "Or they would fall out of the sky and land in my lap somehow. It WAS a hack, right? I'm not seeing any detection!"

"How should I know? It certainly wasn't *my* hack. Anyway, this is for you. The boss sends his regards." His friend had lifted up one hand to admire his nails, which were currently filed to sharp points and gleamed like polished hematite. The other was extending a cream colored envelope.

The turtle got up, abandoning the security logs, and walked over to take the letter from Jonas. He opened it quickly and looked it over. It wasn't very long and the letters were huge.

It said:

DONATELLO,

DO NOT EVER THINK

THAT I HAVE GIVEN

UP ON YOU.

- LORD T.

Don read it over twice, then flipped it to make sure there was nothing on the back. Then he set it down on the nearest surface and noted, "Lord Tempo? That's... awfully warm and fuzzy of him."

The blue alien stretched languidly. "Mm, no. Obviously Tempo wants nothing to do with you."

"Good. That guy is a tool, so – feeling's mutual." Don picked the letter back up and opened it with an irritated snap.

Jonas sighed, digging two fingers into his temples briefly. "Could we possibly *refrain* from saying things that will lose us council votes right after you've had a loud and crazy fit, please?"

Doubtful again, Don thought bitterly, but said nothing. He waved the letter and said, "If this guy wants to help so badly, tell him to unseal my goddamn panic room."

Jonas rose from the office chair in a fluid motion, moving to stand face to face with Donatello. He leaned forward to speak quietly but emphatically. "You are not going to win that fight. The new boss, he wasn't too impressed with your panic room's *contents* ." His brows arched pointedly. "Know what I'm saying?"

"Oh," Don said very softly. Anger shot through him – white, hot anger. They were always doing this, making choices for him, telling him how his life must be lived. *Bite it back. Keep it down. Rage will not solve this.* "If that's what this is about, " he managed in a fairly calm voice, "then there is no problem. I will dismantle the second

lab. Honestly, I was already planning to do so. Tell him we can go in together. Anything he doesn't approve of, I'll clear it out. Just – please, give me back the room!"

"What are you looking at me for? Nobody asks *my* opinion on these matters. I'm just a duster who's failing the second grade."

Don crumpled the heavy cream paper into a tightly-wadded ball with one hand, made note of the wastebasket across the room, did the geometry, and pitched it hard against the opposite wall. It bounced once and sailed smoothly into the trash.

"See? Now, *that* was sexy," the omatran commented, flashing a lazy grin. "The next time we hang out, you should use *that* move to get women. All night long, you can just creatively discard things."

In spite of his dark mood, Donatello flashed an appreciative smirk at that. "Wadded up paper missiles are not going to top my shuriken bar tricks."

"As I recall, your 'shuriken bar tricks' sliced off the tip of some dude's ear."

"Well, he wasn't holding them still! I did warn him. Anyway, no harm was done. You grew it back for him just fine."

Jonas widened his eyes and laughed, "It's a down side. I'm just saying!"

Donatello started laughing too, in spite of himself. He pressed his fingers into his eye sockets briefly and commented, "Wow. So this is really happening, huh? I am completely screwed."

Jonas rolled his eyes. "You're not."

"Yes, I am. Now listen, Jonas – you've got to help me. You've got to hook me up with some kind of rapid detox that Renet mentioned. She's been saying for months that I should ask you about it."

"She... really?" Jonas blinked and spoke in a more vulnerable voice than Don was used to hearing from him. "I didn't know."

"Yeah, you wouldn't." Don crossed his arms in annoyance. "I politely told her to fuck off."

"Well," Jonas answered with caution, "unfortunately, Renet doesn't always know what she's talking about. I tried to explain this to her when she first brought it up with me. Clearly, she still doesn't get it."

"Get what?" The turtle's arms unfolded and he twisted his hands together, starting to look spooked. "What's not to get? Renet said you've done it for yourself a bunch of times. You can draw my blood, take DNA samples - whatever you need to get started!"

"No, mate. Listen to me." Jonas seized the turtle's wrists in an effort to force his attention. "This is a *psychological* addiction we're talking about. That means you're not going to get sick. You're not going to puke or shake or sweat or any of that." He paused for emphasis. "You're just going to *want* . I've got no antidote for *wanting.* It's going to be you versus your brain, from now on."

"Shit," Don whispered, dropping his eyes and swallowing hard.

"But, look, I can still make this easier for you. The first thing we want to do is get you scheduled for a quick procedure where we'll try to recover any damage you may have already done to your dopamine and serotonin neurotransmitters. Because, assuming the batch we found in your panic room is typical, even moderate use is going to kill off dopaminergic neurons like you wouldn't believe."

"What?" Don was pretty sure his brain was already having some kind of massive internal failure just from hearing these words.

Jonas sighed. "Right. Want me to slow down? I want to get you scheeeduled... for a quick proceeeedure..."

"Stop, no, stop, just – I heard you! I get it. But - are you blaming this cell death on my chemistry? The purity..."

"The purity of your product is not the issue, Hamato. It's *plenty fucking pure* , okay? It's also a pretty big step up from the d-amphetamine sulfate you were cooking in there the last time you let me check out the lab in your panic room."

"I just…" Don flinched. "I'd rather smoke it. You can't smoke d-Amp."

"Well, you could purify and do an acid-base extraction..."

"Or," Don snapped, "for *half* the work and resources, I could cook meth."

"Fine. Just... tell me you're not *banging* that shit."

"Oh, that's great. You're going to lecture me about route of administration now?" Don snarled. "This, from the guy who would rather shoot up with girls than sleep with them?"

"It's a yes or no question."

"I'm not, okay?!" Don exploded. "I don't IV drugs!"

"Hey, that's what you've always said to me." Jonas shrugged gently. "But then we found an open box of insulin syringes in your panic room. And not one of you has diabetes. I checked. You mutants with your super metabolisms aren't even capable of getting it, turns out, so… yeah. The boss was pretty upset."

Donatello's brow creased and his mouth worked. Finally he said, "Can't you just check the footage?"

"We've got no eyes into that place from Nulltime. Might be another reason the boss thinks it has to go."

"Fantastic! Damning evidence and no way to prove myself. That's perfect."

"What do you mean?" Jonas asked calmly.

"I mean, I was telling you the truth! I don't IV drugs. I just... I might've... thought about it. Unwrapped it. Loaded it. Came to my senses." He hugged his arms around himself and looked away. "I might've come real close."

"Okay! That's good, actually." Jonas nodded to himself. "That'll make this easier."

"I'll tell you what would have been easier," Don griped. "Having this conversation two days ago!"

"Oh yeah?" Jonas prompted, though due to the recent surveillance duties, he already had a pretty good idea where this was headed.

"Yeah. I started tapering off as soon as Leo got back, just like I'd planned. I was down to next to nothing. A bump or two in the morning. Sometimes again after lunch. Maintenance, that was it!" He shook his head with true regret. "I'd been doing really good."

"So what happened?"

"The - the stupid *Talk* happened!" Donatello flung his hands apart in frustration. "My dad springs it on me that he knows about Renet and ropes me into educating my brothers about sex. He gives me just one night to prepare, and - I don't know! I freaked out! I thought, if I could just – if I could face them full of energy and confidence…" Don put his face in his hands and realized aloud, "Ugh, it's a pathetic excuse. I swear, it sounded like sense at the time."

"Hey, I get it," Jonas sighed. "You versus your brain. That's just what it's going to be like for a while. Sometimes it helps if you can recognize high-stress situations while they're still headed your way. Then you can mentally brace for it, and maybe stick real close to somebody. Tell 'em not to let you out of their sight until the rough times are over. You need somebody who you wouldn't ever use in front of, somebody who knows your situation."

" *Nobody* on Third Earth knows this situation," Don hissed, "and I'd very much prefer to keep it that way."

Jonas shrugged, "Then you're setting yourself up for failure."

"Where do you even get off?" the turtle began, his temper rising again. " *You* , of all people—"

"You think I didn't tell him?" Jonas didn't quite shout, but his ever-calm facade cracked briefly as he continued in a sharper tone. "You think I didn't tell him I would be a fucking hypocrite, coming in here, talking to you about this shit? And I told him that *you, of all people,* would call me out on it." The fire in his eyes shuttered and his mouth curled with a thin smirk. "That was pretty good, though – what you said earlier about me and girls?"

Guilt slithered inside him now. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I said that. It was a low blow."

"No, that was a called shot and you nailed it. Man, if I could find a girl who just wanted to bliss out on my products. We could lay around and make out, listen to music? *Shasi,* if she knew how to *play* music? That would be it. I would have to life-bond with that bitch. We might even be happy for a while, until she fucking dies on me. Because nobody's got the willpower to keep up with me without losing their shit – and even if she did, guess what? I'm fucking immortal."

"Jonas," Don pleaded softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean… I'm screwed up, okay? When I'm crashing hard, I snipe at people. Whether or not I really want to. I chase everyone away, you know?"

"Nope," Jonas's mouth twitched and his tone was very flat. "I never came off drugs and acted like an asshole before. Got no idea what that's like." He broke into a shadow of his usual grin.

Donatello tried to return the smile, but his was tremulous and fleeting. "I'm terrified to go back out there, to be… *like this,* " he

admitted very quietly. "You have to understand, the last thing I want is to be an asshole to Mike."

"You're already *being* an asshole just by shutting yourself up in here. That kid is pacing the hall just outside your door, starting to wonder if you're even in here."

"Shit," Don whispered. His dark eyes lanced towards the door, then to the clock, and back again. "I've spent longer in here than I realized. What am I going to tell him, Jonas? I'm supposed to be bringing him this game controller I told him I've been working on. And it's true, but - I wasn't keeping it *here* , you see? If we can't get access to the room… what will I say to him? That I just lost track of where I put it? That doesn't sound like something I would say about an invention in progress! I wouldn't! Mike knows that I wouldn't, he -"

Donatello cupped his face suddenly and gasped against his palm. "God, I'm tired. I can't - I don't see a solution. I can't afford to lie to him right now, Jonas. But because of all this, I'll have to. I'll have to lie constantly. And…"

His head came up suddenly to take a steadying breath. "Right now, I just don't have the - the emotional stability and reasoning capacity to pull it off. Not against him. He picks up on strong emotions lately, we've essentially proven it. But more than that, he. He's so smart, Mikey - I mean, he'll fool you!" A pained and altogether unexpected laugh croaked from his throat. So much for steadying breaths. His fingers moved to cage his mouth, but he continued to smile as he spoke on. "Maybe you haven't been watching this family long enough to see through his obnoxious belching and impulsive behavior, but Mikey's really quite-"

"I've been watching long enough," Jonas promised quietly, cutting Don off. "From what I have seen of that kid, so far? Pretty big fan."

"Great. So… help me not to lose him. I need sanctuary, Jonas. Somewhere to camp out and get my story in order. Plan things out. Even take a decent nap. Then I can-"

The blue-skinned alien lifted a slender finger in the air and cut him off again. "Wait, here's a crazy plan. Don't lie to him."

Don looked at him incomprehension for a beat and a half before demanding, "What? How do I pull that off? Explain."

"You just don't," Jonas assured him. "Don't lie to him anymore. About anything."

He waited. The mutant turtle said nothing. "Look, Hamato. I don't think I can simplify the concept of this plan any further…"

"Don't lie to Mike about anything," Don repeated. "Sure, yeah. Sounds great! Look, I just want to put it on record here that if I follow this advice from an official representative of time, then I should not be held responsible for the inevitable alarms blaring when Mike starts asking dangerous questions that get all of us hauled back into court, and-"

"It's not your job to worry about that anymore."

"Mikey has clearance?" Don realized with a visible jump. "That's what you're saying. You actually - you got timeline clearance and protection for Mike, somehow!"

"All I'm saying," Jonas insisted, pausing to give Don a mock frown. "All I'm ALLOWED to say to you at all, on the OFFICIAL RECORD - is that not lying to your little brother seems to me like a really swell plan. And now, would you look at any one of those wearable clocks I haven't earned yet? Gotta go."

"Thank you, Jonas!" Suddenly his arms were locked around the taller alien, hugging him fiercely.

"Ugh. Physical contact," the Omatran complained. "Must you?"

Don let go of him with a laugh and quickly wiped at his eyes. "I mean it. This is better than getting the panic room back. A better solution."

"We are glad you agree, *ka'chaiya* . I'll see about getting back some more of your displaced belongings, but for now - *catch!"*

Delayed reaction times made a near thing of getting hit in the face by the object that was suddenly hurtling towards him. Somehow Donatello managed to get his hands up in time.

He blinked and looked around, but Jonas was already gone. Then the turtle looked down at his hands to realize he was holding his prototype controller.

Less than thirty seconds later, Jonas found himself accosted once again. This time it was Lord Titan's arms that had cinched around him tightly. "My dude! Ten out of ten. You did great down there. I mean it. You did so well."

"Augh," Jonas squirmed in futility. "Again with the proximity and the squeezing. I don't like this Earthling custom!"

"I just saw the latest projections," the ancient turtle explained, not quite ready to let go. "So many future lies undone… Yeah, sorry. You'd better just get used to it."